



THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: He was like a rooster who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow.

— GEORGE ELIOT



UAPA doesn't override IPC

The Supreme Court has underlined the importance of following all the legal niceties even in cases registered under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. It was on this basis that a two-member Bench ordered the release of NewsClick founder Prabir Purkayastha. However stringent a law may be, it does not give the police freedom to bypass provisions of the Indian Penal Code that protect a citizen from illegal arrest. In the instant case, the accused was not given a copy of the First Information Report (FIR) based on which he was arrested. When he was presented before a magistrate for remand, his side was not heard because he was not even duly informed about why he was arrested. Worse, the remand order was tampered with by including two sentences from the FIR which were more refined and well-written than the previous sentences. The two judges were convinced that the addition was to make up for the lapse on the part of the police to give a copy of the FIR to the magistrate.

The citizen enjoys certain fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 20, 21, and 22 of the Constitution. These rights include the right to enjoy freedom of movement which can be curtailed only if the person concerned commits a crime and his arrest is inevitable while prosecuting him. A person who is arrested is entitled to know why he is being arrested. He also enjoys the right to defend himself when he is presented before a magistrate within 24 hours of the arrest. On October 3, 2023, the apex court had in a case under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) ordered that the police must share the FIR with the accused. The court has merely extended it to UAPA cases also.

Very serious charges have been made against Purkayastha. While the court took cognisance of the fact that the police have filed a charge-sheet against him, they have not framed the charges so that the trial could be started. Otherwise, he could have been released without having to provide surety. The conditions for bail in UAPA and PMLA cases are almost impossible to fulfil. This is all the more reason that the police follow all the constitutional requirements while arresting a person. The police also owe to the arrested person a responsibility to try him at the earliest, as underscored by the instant verdict.

Freebies vs freebies

In the battle of freebies, politicians are pulling out all the stops to win over voters. From K. Kamaraj, who is remembered more for his "parkalam" (let's wait) than for the free education he offered in the state of Madras in the fifties, to Nitish Kumar's bicycles for schoolgirls in Bihar, freebies have become as essential to Indian elections as chai stalls. But in this high-stakes game of giveaways, who will emerge as the true champion? In one corner, we have the BJP, offering a modest 5kg of free rice or wheat per person per month. In the other corner, the Congress is upping the ante with a promise to double the grain handout to a whopping 10kg. That's enough to feed a small army, or at least a very hungry family of four for a month.

But hold onto your dhotis and sarees, friends, because Rahul Gandhi is here to shake things up. Not content with just grains, he's promising cold, hard cash. Yes, you heard it right. If the INDIA Alliance comes to power on June 4, one lucky woman from each poor family will receive a payment of Rs 1 lakh. It's like winning the lottery, but with a political twist. Of course, these freebies may not seem as extravagant as the promise of Rs 15 lakh per person that the BJP made in the 2014 election. The money was to be obtained from Swiss banks where it was stashed away. By the way, can anyone really eat 10kg of rice in a month? And will handing out cash to select families really solve poverty? Who knows, but one thing's for sure: Indian politics has never been more entertaining. So grab your roasted groundnuts and settle in for the ultimate showdown of freebies vs freebies.



BACK TO CHUNGKING AGAIN? EXODUS FROM CANTON BEGINS
Canton, May 16. Hankow Nationalist Radio announced that Communist forces entered the City at 5 P.M. local time today. The radio ceased transmitting shortly after making this announcement.

Of rose gardens, bell jars and yellow wallpaper

Herstory
✦ Deepa Gahlot

Before political correctness cleaned up our vocabulary, "mad" was the catchall word for any kind of mental illness, from retardation to depression to schizophrenia. Nobody had heard of bipolar disorder or postpartum blues. Going to a psychiatrist or 'shrink' was considered shameful. If a person — more often than not, a woman — became somehow unmanageable, they were sent to mental asylums, or loony bins in slang. Women were termed hysterical, no matter what the symptoms, and the treatment was heavy medication, electric shocks and in extreme cases, hysterectomy.

This is Mental Health Awareness Week, and time to recall Joanne Greenberg's cult novel, *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* (written under the pseudonym Hannah Green), published 60 years ago, just a year after another seminal novel exploring a woman's depression, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, about debilitating depression. Teenagers down the ages have, and still would, relate to the story of a 16-year-old girl, who retreats from ugly reality into a fantasy world.

Greenberg said of the novel, "I wrote this novel, which is a fictionalised autobiography, to give a picture of what being schizophrenic feels like and what can be accomplished with a

trusting relationship between a gifted therapist and a willing patient. It is not a case history or study. I like to think it is a hymn to reality."

The book became a bestseller, was turned into a film in 1977 and a play in 2004, its impact and influence remaining strong as ever. Greenberg's fictional alter ego was the mentally tormented Deborah Blau, whose imagination created alternative realities of The Kingdom of Yr, with a language of its own.

Her parents Esther and Jacob love their daughter but are affected by the stigma of Deborah's mental illness, and her younger sister Suzy has to cope with all the attention her sister's condition demands. An excerpt from the book conveys the terror and confusion of the parents.

"They decided to go into the diner, being very careful and obviously usual about their movements. When they had seated themselves in a booth by the windows, they could see her coming back around the corner of the building and moving toward them; they tried to look at her as if she were a stranger, someone else's daughter to whom they had only now been introduced, a Deborah not their own. They studied the graceless adolescent body and found it good, the face intelligent and alive, but the expression somehow too young for sixteen.

"They were used to a certain bitter precocity in their child, but they could not see it now in the familiar face that they were trying to convince themselves they could estrange. The father kept thinking: How could strangers be right? She's ours... all her life. They don't know her. It's a

mistake — a mistake!
"The mother was watching herself watching her daughter. 'On my surface... there must be no sign showing, no seam-a perfect surface.' And she smiled."

While the Blas are tackling their own mixed emotions, Deborah goes into a different world. As Greenberg writes, "Into the vacuum of the Mid-world where she stood between Yr and Now, the Collect was beginning to come to life. Soon they would be shouting curses and taunts at her, deafening her for both worlds. She was fighting against their coming the way a child, expecting punishment,

battle and makes efforts to rejoin normal life. The novel has been criticised for misinterpreting the signs of schizophrenia, but Greenberg wrote of her own struggles in a society that either romanticised or feared mental illness, but seldom understood it. In the late 1960s, when Greenberg's novel was published, mental illness was even more baffling to the layperson, because of the ignorance surrounding it. That led to insensitive trolling of mentally unstable people and poor treatment procedures in institutions. Very few doctors or carers had the patience to deal with the mentally ill, or even the training to recog-

wallpaper. Her isolation eventually drives the woman to despair and the frightening depths of madness.

Several books about mental illness — particularly those concerning women — are also about this kind of oppression that the woman is unable to escape from or find the tools to fight against. The word "gaslighting", popular today in internet lingo, was originally used to denote the manipulation of a person into doubting their own perceptions, eventually leading to mental instability. (*Gaslight* was Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play in which a man tries to drive his wife to insanity to usurp her wealth, and has been adapted for the screen twice.)

Since *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden* was published, there have been major advances in the treatment of mental issue, and at least some of the stigma has reduced. Genetic as well as environmental factors are taken into account when, in many cases, a cause of the illness cannot be pinpointed; a combination of drugs, therapy and constant support is used to help patients. Celebrities coming out and talking about their struggles have encouraged others to cope with their problems too.

As the lyrics of Joe South's 1967 song *Rose Garden*, sung by several performers, go:

*I never promised you a rose garden
Along with the sunshine
There's gotta be a little rain sometime
When you take you gotta give so live
and let live or let go.*

Deepa Gahlot is a Mumbai-based columnist, critic and author

This is Mental Health Awareness Week, and time to recall Joanne Greenberg's cult novel, 'I Never Promised You A Rose Garden', published 60 years ago

anticipates it by striking out wildly. She began to tell the doctor the truth about some of the questions he was asking. Let them call her lazy and a liar now. The roar mounted a little and she could hear some of the words in it. The room offered no distraction. To escape engulfment there was only the Here, with its ice-cold doctor and his notebook, or Yr with its golden meadows and gods. But Yr also held its regions of horror and loss, and she no longer knew to which kingdom in Yr there was passage. Doctors were supposed to help in this."

It is with the help of a sympathetic therapist, Dr Clara Fried, that Deborah slowly recovers after a three-year

nise and differentiate between the symptoms. Quacks and charlatans filled in the gaps of information with superstition and bizarre rituals of exorcism or branding.

Much before Greenberg's and Plath's novels were published, in 1892, a story called *The Yellow Wall Paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman was published in *The New England Magazine*, in which, after childbirth, a woman is diagnosed by her physician husband with a "temporary nervous depression — a slight hysterical tendency" and sent to an asylum. It is supposedly to rest, but she is actually imprisoned in the former nursery of an old colonial mansion, with barred windows, and peeling yellow

Lawyer-nun's futile bid to contest SC bar poll

Legal Eagle
✦ Olav Albuquerque

Those who profess to represent God in human affairs must not always be taken seriously because their wisdom is based upon tradition and custom which is man-made. This is true of all religions, because whether it is Hinduism, Islam, Christianity or Shintoism, people blindly worship men or women who profess to represent God — with disastrous consequences.

This has emerged when a nun, who is practicing in the Supreme Court, wanted to contest the prestigious Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) elections, which is apolitical, but was refused permission by her congregation to do so. Her congregation has not understood that if this nun wins the election, she will be able to influence policies to benefit destitute women. Many senior advocates do have political affiliations but by-and-large, it is individual advocates who contest these elections because of the prestige it brings them which in turn may help them garner more clients.

The contrarian point of view is that a nun renews her vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience to the head of her congregation whom she can never disobey. These nuns

and priests cannot reason why but must do and die. Unlike other members of the SCBA, a nun who is elected to the managing committee will truly work for the people and not for money because they are not allowed to have bank accounts. The sisters of Saint Ann of Providence, to which Sr Jessy Kurien belongs, is an Italy-based congregation that has been active in India since 1871.

Rather than see the enormous benefit of allowing a member of their congregation to contest the elections, the Mother Superior and managing council of her congregation refused permission to Sister Jessy Kurien to contest the SCBA elections, thereby bringing to an ignominious end what would have been a first in these elections — a nun who is wedded to Lord Jesus Christ, being elected to the most powerful Bar Association in the country. Her victory would create a first for all time to come — a nun contesting and being elected as a member of the managing committee of the SCBA.

Jessy Kurien, the only nun practicing law from Saint Ann of Providence, says the Church allowed her to become a member of the National Commission for Minority Educational Institutions in 2008. This is a government of India body and each member has powers akin to that of a district civil judge. The protocol offered was similar to that of a secretary to the government of India.

She began to practice law despite being a nun, 19 years ago soon after

the Supreme Court ruled that nuns and priests who had passed their LL.B degree, could practice anywhere in the country because becoming a nun or a priest was not a profession but a calling from God.

The case arose after the Kerala Bar Council (KBC) refused to give a Sanad (= license to practice law) to some priests and nuns who had passed their LL.B. These nuns challenged this erroneous decision in the Kerala High Court but the KBC appealed against this decision in the Supreme Court which upheld

testing these prestigious elections which would have boosted her work for women's rights.

But now she messaged all the SCBA voters saying she has withdrawn from the fray owing to objections from her congregation. She told another newspaper: "I was surprised to learn that the authorities of my congregation in Rome refused to permit me to contest the SCBA elections. The SCBA is not a political platform or a body from where I can derive monetary benefits. Canon law does not prohibit a

contest the SCBA elections on May 5, three days after she informed the president of her congregation in India that she would be contesting. "Though I began to canvass a month ago, I officially sent an email to the president on May 2. I was present in Hyderabad that day and as per convention, before I left that city, I told the president about my travel plans to Delhi as well as about the election."

Strangely, until May 4, she did not get any response until she returned to Delhi. Only one day later, she received a message from her congregation that said the "Mother General and the council" were not in favour of her contesting the SCBA elections. This message devastated Sr Jessy Kurien who thought that contesting elections was part of her legal profession.

Thursday was the last day to file nominations to contest the SCBA elections. This was why this nun could not send an email requesting the Church to hear her out before making an informed decision with reasons. However due to the message she got at the last moment, she was unable to send an email to ask the managing council and the Mother Superior of her congregation to reconsider their decision.

So, her resolve to help women in distress by influencing policy decisions of the government of India has been brought to nought.

Olav Albuquerque holds a PhD in law and is a senior journalist and advocate at the Bombay High Court

A nun elected to the SCBA managing committee will truly work for the people and not for money because they are not allowed to have bank accounts

the decision of the Kerala high court so that nuns and priests throughout the country could start practicing law after they passed the LL.B degree. There are a few priests who have secured their Ph.D in law but are wary of entering the dog-eat-dog competition within the courts.

Jessy Kurien held training sessions for Supreme Court employees on gender sensitization which is why she wrote over 400 books and articles on various laws, mainly those affecting women's rights. This was why she decided to contest the SCBA elections for the post of member-executive so that she could serve women better. Tragically, her congregation objected to her con-

nun or a priest to contest an election for an association of advocates."

Hence, the decision of her congregation violates the very law which empowers them to become nuns and priests. Interestingly, some nuns hold the MBBS degree and some of them have even pursued the MD degree so that they are allowed to practice medicine. A few are products of St John's Medical College in Bangalore. Sister Jessy wanted to contest the Lok Sabha elections on a ticket of a certain political party. Understandably, her congregation refused her permission on that occasion but the SCBA election is altogether different.

Jessy explained she received the message refusing her permission to

Nation First

— Swami Brahmavidananda Saraswati

In this election season, politicians are freely promising freebies, without the thought of where the resources will come from.

If indeed all the resources are going to be used for freebies, then will there be any left for the development of the country? This is not what the Indian Sanaatana tradition is about.

Ancient India had a monarchy but the king did not have absolute power. He had an advisory Council of Ministers including a spiritual advisor.

It was not always the eldest that became the king. The most fit person was chosen to be the king. If none of the sons of the King qualified, any prominent citizen could be approached to be the king. The king himself along with the council of ministers would do that. Clearly, the system was

very different from what it is today. Leaders did not have to beg for votes with the promise of freebies. They were free to work for the development of the country.

The most important function of the king was to see that there was a rule of law and that rule of law extended to every part of the country.

Every citizen including the king himself came under this rule of law.

This was Rama Rajya. It did not mean that everything was perfect. There was equality in the sense of equal opportunities to develop their own talents, opportunities for education, which was free and state-sponsored. People were free to follow their chosen profession and even change the profession if necessary.

Was it Utopia? No. There were limitations but the commitment of the government was to development. Everyone kept the nation first. Unlike now where vested interests try-

ing to pull the country apart. Will we get a government that puts the nation first? While there are many ways every-one can get involved in politics, each has to find their way. The bare minimum is voting.

It is not only a responsibility as a citizen but in ancient days it was a religious, spiritual duty.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An open letter and a plea

Honourable Chief Minister (Maharashtra) and Commissioner BMC, the objective of this writeup is to bring your attention to the billboard falling incident on May 13, 2024, which you are surely aware of. Sadly, the incident proves that we pay attention to anything only when some lives are lost. What was the fault of those who died because of that huge illegal hoarding? So many families are destroyed. Their dreams are shattered. So many of them lost their husbands, wives, sons, daughters, friends, sisters and brothers. Their lives will not be same without those lost for ever. We request you to bring those guilty of carelessness to book. It is important that they must bear the consequence of their insensitive attitude. Let us see heads roll for the death of common people. Secondly, we would like to know what compensations are given. Will it help them to afford a normal education, secure home and food? Or do they have to go through emotional as well as financial trauma? Thirdly, what are we going to do with many more such hoardings? Will we

remove them all before such unpredicted storm to save lives? I understand that policies are in place but implementation is equally needed. Can we expect implementation, Sir? Awaiting a response.
Ramita, Mumbai

Wrong message

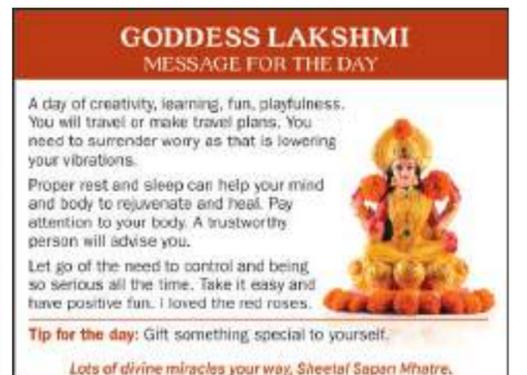
This refers to the news item 'Cancelling doc's admission would be nation's loss' (May 15). The logic given by the court in the instant case is not convincing. To obtain a certificate of non-creamy layer based on false information itself is a crime. Actually the student who has committed this crime should be punished. But instead she has been rewarded by allowing her to retain her MBBS degree by paying Rs 50,000 towards fine. This sends a message to society that the crime of submitting a false certificate to get admission to a medical course can be condoned by paying a penalty amount. Another point is that this case may be cited as precedent in future to get relief from the court in such similar cases. It is a well-known fact that in our country ratio of doctors to population is very low, but many MBBS doctors prefer to work in civil services. Isn't this a national loss?

Ravindra Bhagwat, Kalyan

Voters POKed in the eye

Rajinath Singh's raking up POK's merger with India is just a diversionary tactic to show the BJP's muscular approach vis-a-vis Pakistan. A clever ploy to demonstrate India's military capability under the leadership of PM Modi. It is hard to explain how POK can even become an election issue when there are more pressing problems back home. Instead, the leadership in Delhi must think of making Manipur feel they are a part of India. The state has been left to stew in its own juices for over 15 months and counting. How to bring about a reconciliation between the warring communities in Manipur and establish a semblance of normalcy in the state ought to give sleepless nights to the Central government. However, Manipur has not figured even once in the election campaign so far. Instead, POK has been pulled out of the BJP's hat just to impress the voters. Whether they are able to see it as a red herring or fall for the show of "BJP's biceps" remains to be seen.
Avinash Godbole, Dewas

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The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

ED in the dock

Court curbs agency's powers under PMLA

THE country is in the midst of the General Election, but it's the ED (Enforcement Directorate) which is far more in the news than the EC (Election Commission). The Supreme Court ruled on Thursday that the ED could not arrest an accused under Section 19 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) after a special court had taken cognisance of the complaint of money laundering. The Bench stated that when an accused appeared before a judge in pursuance of a summons, the agency would have to apply to the court concerned to obtain his or her custody. According to the court, such an accused is not required to apply for bail as he or she would not be treated as being in custody.

The ruling is another setback to the ED, which has been under intense judicial scrutiny in recent months and repeatedly accused by Opposition parties of overreach. These parties, especially AAP, have claimed that their leaders are being targeted by Central probe agencies at the behest of the ruling party. The ED's allegedly unbridled powers under the PMLA have been the subject of a heated debate since 2017, when a Division Bench struck down the Act's Section 45(1), which imposed additional conditions for grant of bail to the accused. However, this decision had been overruled by a July 2022 judgment of another SC Bench.

Meanwhile, the SC has asserted that no exception was made in granting interim bail to Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal in a money laundering case. 'We said in our order what we felt was justified,' the Bench said, adding that a critical analysis of the verdict was welcome. These observations have come two weeks after the court questioned the ED about the timing of Kejriwal's arrest — in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections. Clearly, the ED has a lot of explaining to do in one case after another.

Deadly oversight

Billboard collapse calls for liability, reform

THE collapse of a massive illegal billboard following a storm in Mumbai that claimed the lives of 16 people and injured 75 — all passersby — has exposed a troubling nexus between negligence, corruption and regulatory failure. The disaster underscores the human cost of systemic oversight and dereliction of duty.

The billboard, weighing 250 tonnes and far exceeding permitted dimensions, was erected in blatant violation of civic guidelines. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) had raised concerns about the hoarding two years ago, yet no substantial action was taken to address the hazard. The failure to enforce regulations or dismantle the illegal structure exemplifies the dangerous complacency and possible corruption in municipal circles. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Last June, a huge hoarding on a highway near Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu collapsed, killing three workers on the spot. The police said it had been installed without authorisation by the civic body. In 2019, a young woman died in Chennai when an illegal banner fell on her. Such incidents point to a pattern of negligence and regulatory lapses that put lives at risk.

Culpability extends beyond the advertising agency behind the billboard. The BMC, which allowed this violation to persist despite knowledge and prior warnings, bears significant responsibility. The filing of a culpable homicide case against the advertising agency owner, Bhavesh Bhide, is a necessary but insufficient step. Accountability must be comprehensive, holding all parties responsible for this preventable tragedy. The announcement of compensation by CM Eknath Shinde does not suffice to address the underlying regulatory rot. This mishap should prompt an overhaul of regulations governing outdoor advertising and other hazardous structures. Robust safety audits, stringent enforcement of guidelines and zero tolerance to violations are needed to ensure citizens' safety across the country.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1924

Anti-India propaganda

JUDGING from the papers received by the last foreign mail, an anti-India propaganda of an unprecedented magnitude is just now being carried on by an influential section of the British Press under the pretext of educating the bulk of the electorate, with whom, it should be remembered, rests the ultimate responsibility for a good government in the Indian Empire. The real object underlying this campaign of misrepresentation is not far to seek. It is to rally all the saner elements in the British political life, meaning in common language the die-hards and other professed enemies of legitimate Indian aspirations in one big effort to resist the demand put forward by politically articulate India for an immediate revision of the Government of India Act with a view to the granting of Dominion Home Rule at the earliest possible date. The British voters are being frightened into the belief that India is in a very serious state, and that it will be foolish to underestimate the full gravity of the problems that England has to face in this 'dependency.' It may be that there is enough in the political situation in this country that will be viewed with 'grave concern' by British statesmen, but it is a foul calumny to proclaim, as some of the writers in England are doing, that while only 20 years ago an Englishman's life was 'sacred' to Hindus and Mahomedans alike, nowadays murder of an Englishman is a 'common crime'. The Times, which is always guarded in its statements, does not go so far but does recognise that the entry into the councils of extremists is seriously impeding their action.

All is not bright on the BJP front

The news from centres where four rounds of voting are over is not encouraging for the ruling party



TRYSTS AND TURNS

JULIO RIBEIRO

THE Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) and the more recently established National Stock Exchange (NSE) have spoken. The BSE's Sensex, which began teetering after the first round of the Lok Sabha elections, fell with a bang by a thousand points after the third phase! Sensex and the BSE's Nifty are fairly reliable guides to political situations.

In 2014, the market was anxiously awaiting the arrival of a right-wing government. Speculators had predicted a victory for the BJP. The party's performance in the polls was even better than what the optimists had visualised. Sensex took off at a very fast clip initially and then settled down to a steadier pace till it reached astronomical heights recently when Modi declared that he was aiming for 400 Lok Sabha seats.

The share market is the biggest single gambling den in my city. Of course, gambling on stocks is perfectly legal, though very risky all the same. The operators are not going to venture in without their dollop of *khabar*. Since their money is at stake, the gems of information that Dalal Street operators collect are more authentic than what normal rumour mills produce.

The steep drop in the prices of shares like those of Reliance Industries, HDFC Bank, L&T and TCS, all market leaders, is nothing but ominous. The market feels that the Modi-Shah duo is in trouble. I suspect (kindly note that my suspicion is just that — a suspicion) that the voting trends must have been garnered from the foot soldiers serving the army of 'exit' pollsters. They have been



ON THE BACK FOOT: It is apparent that there is no election 'wave' this time. PTI

debarred by the Election Commission of India (ECI) from publicising their findings till the last vote is punched in on the last day of the month-and-a-half-long battle.

The BJP's inability to enthuse voters this time has been doing the rounds on the streets of our cities and towns. That there is no 'wave' is also apparent. The use of unfair, ungentlemanly tactics like imprisoning a leader of a national party at election time is another clear indication of the nervousness that has taken hold. Even the spectacular inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya did not help, as we now note with the benefit of hindsight.

To add what we *desis* call *masala* to the narrative, one of the first accusations Arvind Kejriwal made on being released on bail to canvas for INDIA candidates was that Narendra Modi would step down at the age of 75 in September next year and that he would be succeeded by Amit Shah as the Prime Minister. This possibility, which incidentally the common man had already predicted, ruffled the feathers of BJP bigwigs. Four of them — Shah himself, Rajnath Singh, Nirmala Sitharaman and JP Nadda — protested vociferously.

The use of unfair tactics like imprisoning a leader of a national party is a clear indication of the nervousness that has taken hold.

They asserted that Modi would serve his full term of five years.

By doing so, they confirmed two hypotheses that would often be debated in parlours and marketplaces and set our doubts at rest. The first was that Modi's diktat that leaders should retire at 75 applies only to his colleagues, not to him. The second, more relevant to us citizens, is that Shah is not the people's choice or even the BJP's rank and file's choice for the top job. The very mention of that possibility by a sworn enemy (Kejriwal) set the alarm bells ringing. Kejriwal is set to return to Bihar

jail on June 2. Before that date, he should draw some more rabbits out of his AAP hat in order to elicit some more truths from the BJP's top brass.

When Kejriwal was released on bail by the Supreme Court, a BJP leader even suggested that the honourable judges were taking sides in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. That inference was in very poor taste. The judges explained in detail why they had decided as they did. What the judges refrained from saying, but was probably on their minds, was that it was the Enforcement Directorate (ED) which was taking sides in the elections by waiting for nearly two years to arrest the leader of an up-and-coming party like AAP. The ED had issued summons to Kejriwal nine times before the arrest. It could have applied the guillotine after the third summons was dishonoured. But, no, the ED obviously had a grander design.

By releasing Kejriwal for the period of the elections, the judges have righted a wrong that the ED had perpetrated and provided a level playing field for the electoral game. The decision restored the people's faith in the

impartiality of the judiciary which, unfortunately, was under question at times of late.

Another well-respected institution, the ECI, should take a leaf from the Supreme Court's book and regain its honour and prestige as an independent, impartial body reporting only to the Constitution and its own conscience. It can regain its good name and establish its credibility if it raps all parties equally when their speakers indulge in hate speech or utter inanities without thinking. The Prime Minister should set the standards. His outburst in Rajasthan about infiltrators and those with large families was one of the worst instances of hate speech heard on the election trail.

In the midst of all this evil, the BJP's partner in Karnataka, the Janata Dal (Secular) of former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, lent a thick slice of spice to the election scenario in that crucial (for the BJP) state. When the story of the patriarch's grandson, Prajwal Revanna, broke, Modi's party immediately distanced itself from the young man's peccadilloes. But some of the stain will remain.

If Prajwal's alleged escapades were not enough, the cup of despair was filled to the brim when allegations of molestation were made against a constitutional functionary in West Bengal by a female Raj Bhavan employee. The Governor's claim that the charge was fabricated and politically motivated may have cut ice with the public but for his misconceived move to summon the media and display CCTV footage to disprove the allegations. The Governor was not caught *in flagrante delicto* like the late Congressman from Uttarakhanda who was the Governor of Andhra Pradesh when three women were pictured purportedly in his bed.

The news from the centres where four rounds of voting have been completed is not encouraging for the party that spoke of a tally of 400 for the NDA and 370 for itself alone. At present, it is squarely on the back foot, fighting for a marginal victory in a close battle.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Voting in an election is a skill, not a random intuition. — Socrates

'Z' security challenge

BRIG SANDEEP THAPAR (RETD)

A few months after my promotion to a flag rank in the Army, I was allotted the Pune brigade. As it was located next to the Southern Command headquarters, I assumed that this would be a challenging appointment.

Soon, I reached Pune and took over. Knowing the operational area and the units was the key to a successful command. I got on with the job. While one of the units in my brigade was from the Sikh regiment (my own regiment) and relatively easy to identify with, the other two were from the illustrious Maratha and Mahar regiments. The Mahar battalion was on its way out; the Maratha unit was midway through its tenure. During my first visit, the Maratha CO informed me that his unit would be celebrating its Golden Raising Day the following year. Incidentally, the Corps Commander was not only from the same regiment but also the same unit — and this complicated matters. He was a simple man with few requirements but would find fault with the most inconsequential things. Suddenly, the event acquired a bigger stature.

For such occasions, normally all officers of the unit are invited, in addition to officers from a local formation. Any special invitee is approved by the Colonel of the Regiment (COR, the seniormost officer of the regiment), if senior to him. One fine day close to the event, the Maratha CO informed me that Gen KS Brar (ret'd) had conveyed his desire to attend the Raising Day, and the COR had approved it.

Gen Brar (aka Bulbul Brar) commanded the forces in Operation Blue Star. He had 'Z' security and there were protocols to be followed during his visits. Soon, I got instructions from higher HQ that my formation would be responsible for his security during the visit. Since my Mahar battalion had moved out on turnover and its replacement unit was yet to arrive, and with Maratha battalion involved in its event, I allotted the task to the Sikh unit.

Preparations commenced till one day I got a call from the Colonel (Intelligence) of the Command HQ. He came straight to the point. 'Do you know why Gen Brar has Z-category protection, sir?' I wanted to tell him that I was handling the turmoil during that turbulent post-Blue Star period at an isolated post in the North-East when he was still a kid, but all I said was 'I do'. Then, he said: 'And yet you have made a Sikh unit responsible for his protection?'

In reply, I asked him: 'Do you know which unit has been responsible for Gen Brar's security at his Mumbai residence for the past two years?'

'It is the garrison battalion, sir,' he said.

'And do you know which is that garrison battalion?'

'No, sir.'

'It is a Sikh battalion,' I said, ending the conversation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India must push for ceasefire

With reference to 'Gaza tragedy', the world sees India as an empathic country. New Delhi rushes to the rescue of any country reeling under a humanitarian crisis. A case in point is the extension of a credit line by India to crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India always stands up for human rights. Its lack of action against Israel's excesses in Gaza will hit its global standing. The war is destroying countless lives, tearing families apart and rendering people homeless. The UN probe into the matter is welcome. While India should not get drawn into the Israel-Hamas war, it must at least take a firm stand on it. The death of the UN staffer is yet another reason for India to call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

ASHA RANI, YAMUNANAGAR

Protection of civil liberties

Apropos of 'Rule of law prevails', the protection of civil liberties and ensuring justice are of utmost importance in a democratic country. Even though the Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised that bail should be the norm and jail an exception, citizens often bear the brunt of misuse of anti-terror laws and a lack of adherence to arrest procedures by investigation agencies. Loopholes and procedural lapses are quite common in police investigations and arrests. The conviction rate in India in such cases remains very low. However, every case is different. And in some cases, an accused has to be kept behind bars to send out a strong message. The public must not lose faith in the Indian justice delivery system.

NISHANT PRASHAR, KANGRA

Mere release not enough

Refer to the editorial 'Rule of law prevails'; the mere release of NewsClick editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha and human rights activist Gautam Navlakha is not enough. There has to be a provision in place for compensation to an accused in case he is kept in wrongful confinement for a certain amount of time. The two cases have once again raised questions about the functioning of the police and the failure of the lower judiciary to defend civil liberties. Besides, the apex court rightly stressed in

Purkayastha's case the need to inform an accused about the grounds of his arrest.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Negligence costs lives

A massive hoarding collapsed in Mumbai's Ghatkopar area amid a dust storm and unseasonal rainfall. The billboard had reportedly been put up without the permission of the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation). It is a matter of serious concern that at least 16 lives were snuffed out in the incident. Gross negligence on the part of the authorities concerned and a blatant disregard for safety regulations are to blame for the mishap. Officials of Mumbai's civic body should be held accountable for letting ad agencies set up oversized hoardings in the city without any clearance from it.

DEVENDRA KHURANA, BHOPAL

Residents' safety gone to the dogs

Dog bite incidents have become increasingly common across the country. Packs of stray dogs can be seen roaming around residential areas, posing a threat to the safety of the residents, especially children and the elderly. Besides, street dogs, which often search for food in dustbins, can spread diseases. It is imperative that the local authorities concerned take prompt action to check the menace by stepping up vaccination drives and creating shelters for strays. Joint efforts from the government and the residents are needed to tackle the problem and ensure the wellbeing of the people.

SAHIL GARG, RAMPURA PHUL

Double standards of BJP

The BJP workers' protest against the alleged assault on AAP MP Swati Maliwal by an aide of Arvind Kejriwal and the quick action taken by the Delhi Police in the matter reflect the double standards of the saffron party. Where were they when female wrestlers were holding protests against party MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over alleged sexual harassment? Why did these BJP workers not express any concern when the grapplers were manhandled by police personnel? It is unfortunate that government authorities, right from those at the top to the ones at the bottom, remained silent spectators throughout the episode.

BHUPINDER KOCHHAR, PANCHKULA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

Stringent laws have made prolonged detention norm



SRIRAM PANCHU
SENIOR ADVOCATE

IN the film world, we are used to the phenomenon of delayed releases. It seems to be so in the judicial world as well. Arvind Kejriwal has been released after 50 days in captivity, all during peak election campaigning. And now the Supreme Court has set at liberty Prabir Purkayastha after he has been inside a prison for about 225 days. While there is relief at the release, one must question why it takes so long, and what kind of laws keep men behind bars so easily.

Purkayastha is the head of NewsClick, an online journalistic platform known for its sharp reporting, independent views and for not being particularly respectful of the powers that be. People like him are irritants to excessively strong governments, which like media outlets to be supportive by nature or bought out otherwise. How dare he focus on the farmers' agitation, Covid failures and the like! He was charged with a rather unusual offence — of accepting funds from Chinese sources to influence the political narrative in

India. A bit surprising, since one doesn't remember any pro-Chinese narrative from NewsClick. While one should be wary of China, one would have thought that would extend to preventing border incursions and curbing excessive dependence on imports. But no, Purkayastha is the problem, it seems. An associate turned approver — not much to wonder about that since this is happening pretty regularly now, as witnessed in the Kejriwal case.

The flaw in the case was a gaping one. Purkayastha and his lawyer were not informed about the grounds for his arrest and the remand order was passed before the lawyer had received the remand application. Now this kind of non-conformity with the law is what lawyers and judges call "going to the root of the matter"; it vitiates the entire proceedings. Notice that this flaw happened on day one. Yet, and this is what should disturb us, it has taken the judicial system more than half a year to release him.

We need to focus on why it is that invariably the accused has to travel all the way to the apex court to obtain release. Why aren't district courts and high courts doing their job of providing legal redress in cases of personal liberty? While the members of the former may not feel sufficiently protected, HC judges have as much constitutional protection for their independence as the judges of the Supreme Court have. What prevents



LAPSE Prabir Purkayastha (right) and his lawyer were not informed about the grounds for his arrest and the remand order was passed before the lawyer had received the remand application. PTI

them from stepping up to the plate, especially when the facts are stark enough? The system works well when each level of the judiciary plays its part, and an overdependence on the highest court is not healthy. Even there, we have seen the unusual phenomenon of withdrawal of personal liberty cases of prominent individuals after a noticeable change of the roster.

One cannot blame our judges overmuch, however. The chief problem is the monstrous nature of the laws under which these detentions are made. These are the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), 1967, and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002. Purkayastha, Sudha Bharadwaj, Gautam Navlakha, the late Father

Why aren't district courts and high courts doing their job of providing legal redress in cases of personal liberty?

Stan Swamy and other Bhima Koregaon accused were held under the first, and Kejriwal, Hemant Soren, K Kavitha, Manish Sisodia and other politicians under the latter. These Acts and later amendments — and here both the BJP and Congress governments are to blame — make it virtually impossible to get bail, mandating that the judge first find that the accused is prima facie innocent; this is an inversion of the time-honoured principle of presumption of innocence. This principle is the first rule of civilised societies, and any departure from it, unless justified by extreme risk to society, is an indication that the rule of law has become a casualty to politics. There are other damaging provisions — the

authorities can arrest without much cause; the normal criminal law restrictions on the police are absent; confessions obtained in custody are valid. Above all, there is the application of this draconian statute to ordinary offences. Even the dreaded Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), 1976, had an advisory board of high court judges to review detentions during the Emergency; it is noteworthy that the laws in question have no such provision in free India.

The sad part of the story is that the SC has upheld the validity of these laws — lock, stock and barrel — for the State and against citizens. A blot on our judicial landscape is the judgment of Justice AM Khanwilkar in the VM Choudhary case, equalling the constitutional and public damage that was done in that infamous judgment (*ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla*, 1976) where it was held four to one (the great Justice HR Khanna dissented) that with the proclamation of the Emergency and suspension of fundamental rights, citizens were at the mercy of the State. The SC has admitted a review of the Choudhary judgment, but this is another priority case languishing without a hearing. Of cheer today, however, is the judgment of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan, curbing the ED's power to arrest after the special court takes cognisance of a complaint.

Purkayastha's long detention is particularly disturbing because courts worldwide are usually quick to examine cases of journalists being held in preventive custody. The judiciary and a free press are pillars of democracy, and the courts must be more vigilant in checking overbearing governments of whichever hue which threaten their members. But recent detentions have lasted long — journalist Siddique Kappan, for example. In contrast, Arnab Goswami (albeit not arrested under these laws) got double-quick release; these are not good messages to send out.

The record of the authorities in proving guilt and securing convictions under these laws is abysmal — as low as 3 per cent. This means that citizens were being held despite being innocent, and often without reasonable cause. When will our laws and courts start thinking about compensation for unjust imprisonment and deprivation of liberty? And when will we teach officers of such agencies and their political masters that they do not have immunity for mala fide and wantonly wrongful acts? Is the arm of the law sufficiently long?

With the assistance of Vikas Murli Dharam, lecturer, Sai University, and Aprameya Manthena, advocate, Madras High Court

This election is a litmus test of our collective wisdom



ASHWANI KUMAR
FORMER UNION MINISTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE

WITH the conclusion of the fourth phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 13, the electoral fate of contestants from 379 of the 543 seats seeking election to the highest forum of Indian democracy is sealed in ballot boxes. The election, seen as transformative of the nation's political landscape, is witnessing a spirited pushback to the Modi regime from the INDIA bloc, even as the ruling dispensation led by the PM has had a clear head start in scripting its campaign theme.

The Opposition's counter narrative, focused on the defence of constitutional democracy and its concomitant values, is premised on the authoritarian impulses of a muscular state that negate the first principles of liberal democracy and accountability of power enshrined in the nation's republican charter. The

unprecedented arrests across India of the ruling regime's key political adversaries, a demonstrable decline of constitutional institutions, a captive bureaucracy and a generally obsequious media, are cited in support. Ensuring a national resonance for its inspirational narrative is the principal challenge for the Opposition.

Regrettably, the diminishing and debilitating tone of a cacophonous campaign on both sides seems to have drowned out the real issues, with abuse and calumny substituting for reason and contestation. The perversion of democratic discourse helmed by leaders unable to rise above themselves attests to a flailing democracy. The pursuit of power for its appellations alone, with scant regard for its ends and a cynical deriding of political idealism as a utopian dream to be argued out of consciousness, presents the electoral exercise as clothing the pursuit of personal ambitions with a semblance of democratic legitimacy.

If indeed the BJP and the Opposition consider this election a watershed moment that will determine the future of the country, they must continue to focus public attention on core national issues. The INDIA bloc, speaking



PURPOSE This election is about reinforcing the liberties of equal citizenship and ensuring that the power sought in the name of the people is used in furtherance of their inherent rights. ANI

in multiple voices, cannot forget "the plain lesson of history, that the wants of men will only secure recognition to the point that they are forcibly articulate..." as Harold Laski put it. The power of a clear statement is critical for the success of the Opposition's campaign. Apart from an unrelenting focus on its core campaign theme, communicated and made intelligible to each voter, the alliance cannot shirk the critical question of an alternative leadership of the nation. The Congress, as the principal Opposition party, has advisedly chosen

Irrespective of who forms the government, victory must belong to those whose politics and votes sustain a democracy founded on justice and human dignity.

not to formally present its chief campaigner, Rahul Gandhi, as the prime ministerial candidate. Whatever the limitations and logic of the situation, the question of leadership will be critical to the outcome of the campaign, flawed comparisons with the past notwithstanding. As a necessary condition of revitalising itself to serve as the fulcrum of Opposition unity, the grand old party must recognise the distinction between servility and loyalty of its members. Only then can it reclaim the willing allegiance of its alienated cadres. In its internal

functioning, it must listen magnanimously to 'the hidden silences'.

Evidently, self-effacing humility and generosity of heart to heal the erasure of conscience are critical attributes of leadership needed for national renewal.

The PM, as the chief campaigner and torchbearer of his party's ideology, has demonstrated an exceptional tenacity of purpose and will to prevail against the combined opposition of 26 parties. He has strategically anchored his party's campaign in an appealing sense of national glory, hope for the people in their future and emotional sensitivities, and he may well win a third consecutive term in office. But he would, in his wisdom, know that the ideas of justice, dignity and freedom outlive the seduction of power. As the leader of a nation defined by its diversity, he must accept that his primary obligation is to nurture a unifying politics to sustain national unity and bridge the myriad socio-political divides. Electoral victory must mean more than an arithmetical majority.

Irrespective of who forms the government, victory must belong to those whose politics and votes sustain and strengthen a democracy founded on justice and

human dignity, in which all of us can hold our heads high as empowered citizens of an enlightened nation that aspires to be the *vishwaguru*.

In this aspirational view of our common future, there is no scope for narrowness of mind, wilfulness or transient responses to political exigencies at the cost of the nation's foundational principles. In this moment of test, those who stand on the side of freedom will find themselves on the right side of history. This election, seen as a historic milestone in the life of the nation, will test our collective wisdom on how we establish justice as the first virtue of social and political institutions and the basis of a just state.

The election is about reinforcing the liberties of equal citizenship and ensuring that the power sought in the name of the people is used in furtherance of their inherent rights. It will define the land and its people, who alone must mediate their future, remembering that the inviolability of freedom depends on the moral courage, fearlessness and magnanimity of its defenders. This election cannot be about one's victimhood. It must instead heal the deepening fissures in our social fabric so that we can claim that Indian democracy is not a beguiling dream.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD

1		2	3	4	5	6	7
8						9	
10	11		12				
			13				
14				15			
				16			
17					18		19
21			22				23
24							25

ACROSS

- Suffer mental breakdown (5,2)
- Decorative design (5)
- Under intense strain (2,3,4)
- Manage fraudulently (3)
- Frustrate (4)
- Marshy area (8)
- To an excessive degree (6)
- Composer of Don Giovanni (6)
- Of one mind (2,6)
- Percolate slowly (4)
- Occasional (3)
- Out of bounds (3,6)
- Perfume (5)
- Leather-processing factory (7)

DOWN

- Throng (5)
- Operate effectively (3)
- Sharp (4)
- Capital of Czech Republic (6)
- Substantiate (4,4)
- Bring to an end (9)
- A fabrication (7)
- Run away (9)
- Temporary loss of consciousness (8)
- Foreboding disaster (7)
- Gain (6)
- Troublesome (5)
- Portent (4)
- Wrath (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Caught on, 5 Slim, 9 Ultra, 10 Drifter, 11 Oil the wheels, 13 Indoor, 14 Apogee, 17 In the running, 20 Assured, 21 Raise, 22 Then, 23 Prospect.

Down: 1 Clue, 2 Untried, 3 Heart-to-heart, 4 Oodles, 6 Lithic, 7 Marksman, 8 With open arms, 12 Militant, 15 Genuine, 16 Murder, 18 Taste, 19 Wept.

SU DO KU

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

HARD

FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 17TH 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 27
- Jyeshtha Parvishite 4
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 9, up to 8.49 am
- Vyagatha Yoga up to 9.21 am
- Purvaphalguni Nakshatra up to 9.18 pm
- Moon enters Virgo sign 4.05 am

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	19-21 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	06:27 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	43	26
New Delhi	43	25
Amritsar	43	26
Bathinda	45	29
Jalandhar	43	27
Ludhiana	43	27
Bhiwani	45	29
Hisar	46	26
Sirsa	45	30
Dharamsala	33	22
Manali	27	06
Shimla	29	18
Srinagar	27	13
Jammu	40	24
Kargil	26	09
Leh	21	08
Dehradun	39	25
Mussoorie	27	18

TEMPERATURE IN °C



Celebration of democracy

The polling day in Jammu and Kashmir, particularly in the Valley, sent out several positive signals. First, unlike in the past, there were no election boycott calls from militant groups nor was there any attempt to disrupt voting. Second, there was a heartening voter turnout of 38% in Srinagar, a massive jump from 14.4% in the 2019 elections. Third, the peaceful atmosphere allowed a large number of enthusiastic voters to queue up at the polling booths in the region to exercise their franchise. All these indicate a significant step towards democratic renewal in the region after the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of Jammu & Kashmir in 2019. The incident-free voting signals public faith in the electoral process. This is despite considerable anger over the Centre's decision to convert the State into a union Territory. There is a growing desire among the people to actively engage in shaping their future. The impressive voter turnout this time assumes significance when seen against the backdrop of a steadily declining poll percentage in Srinagar since 1996 when the first elections were held in the region following the beginning of the insurgency. It was just 14.4% in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 25.8% in 2014, 25.5% in 2009 and 18.5% in 2004. No untoward incident was recorded from any of the 2,135 polling stations of the Srinagar constituency spread across five districts.

The enthusiastic voter turnout should now serve as a catalyst for the restoration of statehood as promised by PM

The successful conduct of elections should now serve as a catalyst for the restoration of statehood, as promised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his poll rally in Udhampur last month. All stakeholders in the region must seize the momentum and work towards building a more inclusive and representative governance framework that addresses people's aspirations. There is an urgent need to bridge the trust deficit between the government and the people. By choosing not to contest elections in the Valley and limiting itself to Ladakh and Jammu, the BJP has made a strategic retreat as the party is aware of the simmering public discontent. Despite claims of ushering in development and peace after the abrogation of Article 370, there have been no credible follow-up measures to boost development and create jobs in the troubled region. Restoring the statehood and holding Assembly elections are the twin issues that remain unaddressed. Nearly five years after the abrogation of Article 370, ending special status to Jammu & Kashmir, the promised developmental push still remains elusive while the NDA government is unable to give a specific time frame for restoration of statehood. The Supreme Court had, in December last year, directed the Election Commission to hold J&K Assembly polls by September 30, 2024. The union Territory has been without any elected government since June 2018 when the BJP withdrew support to the Mehbooba Mufti-led government.



KAPIL SIBAL
Rajya Sabha member

He (Shah) says 'if we win 400 seats, we will take back PoK'. What if you don't get that many seats? We want you to take it back. Firstly, you should take back 4,000 km that China has taken away



SUNIL CHHETRI
India football skipper

I'm highly, highly fortunate and privileged to be a part of national team for 19 years. It's outstanding to be able to participate and play for the country. This is something no one can take away from me



VUSUMUZI MADONSELA
South Africa's Ambassador to Netherlands

Seven months ago South Africa could not have imagined that Gaza would be largely wiped off the map. Israel's genocide has continued at pace and has reached a horrific stage

Paradox of empowerment

We must look beyond the utilitarian view of education to help women reclaim their voices and roles in society

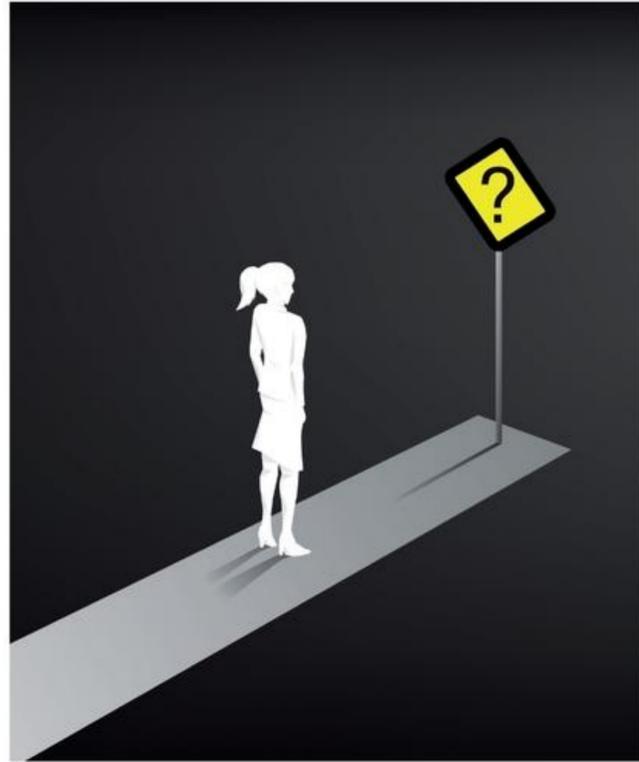


Through the decades, women have been at the centre of societal progress and are crucial for the development of our country. Yet, discussions about their role in society often refer to regressive social norms originating in the early 19th century. Early debates started in the Bengal region where education was used as a means to enforce the traditional role of motherhood and domesticity, overshadowing their true empowerment. The debate was essentially centred around tradition versus modernity rather than the actual uplift of women (Andiappan, 1979).

Pain Points
Nevertheless, attitudes towards women's education have shifted over the last few decades, with an evident peak in the South Asian communities. Women actively started seeking higher education and creating a professional path to employment. Over the past decade, they have sought opportunities beyond caregiving and ventured into other arenas of the labour market. Nonetheless, there still exist pain points regarding the education and employment of women which need our attention.

Even in today's modern age, deep-rooted gender stereotypes and age-old social barriers pose obstacles to women's progress. This issue worsens due to inadequate policies, infrastructure and resources allocated to women's education and employment. Additionally, the lack of representation in decision-making roles compounds the problem, leading to ineffective policy formulation and execution (Andiappan, 1979).

One policy in the education sector that aims to address this inadequacy is the Right of Children to Free and Com-



pulsory Education Act, which was a novel policy enacted in India in 2009. This policy was designed to ensure that every child aged 6-14 years has access to free education till the secondary level (Ministry of Education, nd). While the Right to Education Act changed the landscape of education in India and made significant strides in addressing the educational disparities in the country, the policy has its shortcomings.

Major Challenge
A major challenge internalised by the policy is that it provides free education to children from age six to 14 till an elementary level. With a limited scope of job opportunities in the organised sector, without a college degree, most of these students end up in the unorganised sector and fall prey to the vicious cycle of poverty and bad working conditions (Ministry of Labour & Employment, nd). This is saddening as it defeats the purpose of establishing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act. While the policy is uniform for everyone regardless of one's gender, once again, women are at the disadvantaged end of the spectrum given the structure of the Indian society and labour market.

As a result, young students who benefited from free primary and secondary education under the RTE Act now face financial barriers when they are on the

culsp of enrolling for a professional degree. These financial barriers are further painfully enhanced by the regressive mindsets regarding the education of women, especially in the rural regions of India. These factors together put women on an economic backfoot from a very early stage in their careers. Due to this, women either return to a life of domesticity or are forced into the unorganised job sector out of necessity to earn a livelihood. (Ministry of Labour & Employment, nd)

Especially in the case of South Asian communities, though women are equipped with the right to choose their preferred sector, their choice is often influenced by several temporal factors in the socio-political scenario of the country. Through the decades, though the labour force participation rate of women has declined from 30% in 1983 to 22.5% in 2012, the concentration of females in the informal sector has

While the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act is uniform for everyone, women are at a disadvantage given the structure of our labour market

seen a sharp increase to their male counterparts. This situation demonstrates the unequal distribution of the benefits of economic growth across the gender spectrum.

Informal Sector
However, Nobel laureate Claudia Goldin's "U" hypothesis argues that in the initial stages of development, there exists a greater demand for labour in the industrial sector, especially in the informal sector. Household, socioeconomic, demographic and cultural factors dictating the supply of labour play a critical role in the preference of their economic sector (Goldin, 1994). However, the increasing informalisation of employment and failure of the economy to create full and productive work for everyone with decent pay poses major challenges in the context of raising the educational levels of women in South Asian countries, leading to women in the informal sector becoming invisible to society.

Today, women continue to comprise the majority of workers (71.63%) in the informal sector, exceeding their male counterparts (ILOSTAT Data Explorer, nd). At any given year, there has always been a higher percentage of women in the informal sector as compared to men, especially in 2019. While the percentage of women in the informal sector decreased in the Covid-19 pandemic period, there was a noticeable increase as the economy recovered in 2023. This stark disparity in the composition of the informal sector calls for an effort towards creating a sustainable environment for women to operate in the formal labour market, and transition into secure jobs. They also face discrimination in terms of wages, as their work is often undervalued and not compensated equally despite performing the same task.

In this circumstance, the intrinsic connection between education and employment is glaringly evident. It's time to move beyond this dichotomy, recognising education as a tool for liberation rather than tying women down. It is also imperative that we look beyond the utilitarian view of education. We are woven into society by patriarchal threads, which demand that we recognise the agency of women as paramount. Education, therefore, must serve not only as a means of livelihood but also as a catalyst for women to reclaim their voices and roles in society. As we navigate these complexities, policy formulations must prioritise not just the development of tangible skills but also the empowerment of women. By nurturing their education, we not only equip them with tools for economic independence but also pave the way for their rightful place in shaping our collective future.

(Geethika Jammula is an Economics Graduate and Dr Moitrayee Das is Assistant Professor of Psychology, at FLAME University, Pune)

Letters to the Editor

Fulfil promises

This refers to the cartoon on the Editorial page where the lady alerts her husband to get up and get into the routine work. (May 16). It is natural that political leaders become active during elections. They deliver impressive and affectionate speeches. The leaders divide their speeches into two parts — one is exclusively to promise their guarantees to the people and the second to indulge in the blame game. The people are keen to capture only the promises they make and dream of those guarantees. Political leaders must fulfil the promises they make to the people to get their votes.

G MURALI MOHAN RAO, Secunderabad

Eat well for a healthy life

Diet and nutrition play a huge role in shaping an individual's health. Intriguingly, foods that are quite palatable are generally unhealthy with a few exceptions. What to eat and, more importantly, what not to eat have been intensely debated. India's principal body on formulation and promotion of biomedical research, the Indian Council of Medical Education (ICMR), after a gap of 13 years has come out with a comprehensive report outlining 17 "guidelines" on diet. As expected, excessive consumption of salt, sugar and cooking oil has been decried by the body. According to the research body, the presence of sugar, artificial flavour and non-caloric sweeteners in protein powder preparations are reasons for worry. One salient feature of the ICMR report is its suggestion to exclusively breastfeed infants up to six months of age and continue breastfeeding till the age of two years.

GANAPATHI BHAT, Akola

Booth guidelines

In the absence of notification of poll booth guidelines, voters face problems. Some of them are disappointed as they miss the opportunity to cast their votes despite coming to the booth. Voters are not allowed to carry mobile phones (there is no counter to keep phone). Voters should carry original ID cards (photocopies are not accepted). There is no security check. Booth officers are notified about the guidelines but not the voters. This is one of the reasons for the low percentage of voting, apart from summer heat and voters being away from their village or town.

KANTAMSETTI LAKSHMAN RAO, Visakhapatnam

Questions remain

The BJP leaders questioning Rahul Gandhi if he is the Congress nominee for the post of Prime Minister in response to a public debate involving him and Narendra Modi is extraneous. The participation of both leaders in a non-partisan platform will only benefit the people of the country and will help strengthen democracy. Rahul Gandhi may not have been projected as the prime ministerial candidate of the I.N.D.I.A bloc but there is little doubt that he is the primary face and a leading voice of the Congress and the Opposition in the 2024 general elections. He has been relentlessly raising questions to PM Modi in Parliament on various key issues like rising prices, poverty and unemployment, for which neither Modi nor his party has answered till date. It is clear that the PM will find the debate quite embarrassing and it will put him in a spot of bother as he will not have any convincing answers to key questions concerning the people of the country.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

India in the hotspot

Khaleej Times

Dance videos of Modi, rival turn up AI heat in poll

An AI video shows an ecstatic Narendra Modi sporting a trendy jacket and trousers, grooving on a stage to a Bollywood song as the crowd cheers. The Indian prime minister reshared the video on X, saying "such creativity in peak poll season is truly a delight."

CNN

Millions of migrants are unable to vote

Under India's election rules, eligible voters can only cast ballots in their constituencies. That's all but impossible for many out-of-state workers, especially underprivileged daily-wage workers. And it's a huge group — one study estimates there were about 600 million internal migrants in 2020

The Economist

Modi's growth scheme off to sluggish start

In the early 1990s India abandoned the principles of swadeshi, or self-sufficiency. Subsidies were scrapped; import levies tumbled. By 2014 the average tariff had fallen to 13%, from 125% in 1991. Over the same period, exports soared. Yet the country's exports remain a little lopsided for the tastes of Narendra Modi.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

US apathy

As the 2024 US Presidential election draws nearer, the American electorate finds itself caught in uncertainty and disbelief. The prospect of a Biden-Trump rematch has left many voters grappling with denial, struggling to come to terms with the reality that these two familiar faces could once again dominate the political arena.

Yet, beneath the surface of these familiar tactics lies a deeper truth: neither candidate has fully captured the imagination or enthusiasm of the American people. Polling data reveals a widespread dissatisfaction with the choices presented, with only a fraction of voters expressing excitement or satisfaction about either Mr Biden or Mr Trump.

Argentine turmoil

Argentina grapples with the relentless grip of inflation amid glimpses of a potential slowdown. The latest data indicates an annual inflation rate nearing a staggering 300 per cent, painting a bleak picture for both consumers and businesses alike.

Moreover, the austerity measures, while necessary from a fiscal standpoint, risk deepening social inequalities. Careful calibration is required to ensure these policies do not disproportionately impact those already struggling.

In the face of adversity, Argentina must draw upon its resilience and ingenuity to forge a brighter future for its citizens. It is only through collective effort and unwavering resolve that the country can overcome its economic challenges and emerge stronger on the other side.

Politics and morality

The excessiveness of Israeli actions has pricked the conscience of the youth and the recent uproars, protests, and disruptions on Western university campuses are a testimony to a contra-reaction after the genuine condemnation of the Hamas attack.



Moral righteousness has been the presented face of the foreign policy of the United States of America since time immemorial. But beyond this thin and untenable veneer lurks the dark reality of realpolitik, power play, and even naked ambition at work.

Beyond the stakes and understandable impact of roughly 8-9 million Jews in the United States (with imagined emotions attached to Israel) and their accompanying heft of economic value in terms of 'controlling' Wall Street, media houses and the US economy is general, the state of Israel affords incalculable strategic leverage to the US in global affairs.

Put simply, many of the most powerful and decisive positions in the US administration and the larger socio-economic realm are populated by Jews, who bear their own impulses.

Israel has been called 'America's aircraft carrier in the Middle East' for its ability to flex itself militarily and act as a bulwark against traditional foes such as Russia.

The Americans have used the Israelis to keep many enemies like Iran or terror groups (even so-called 'allies' in the

Arab Sheikdoms) in check, with Tel Aviv's overbearing and lurking presence in the region.

Israelis have managed to extract a price for their relationship with the US, which has routinely exposed the hollowness of American morality in foreign policy.

The most obvious mismatch has been the unprecedented invocation of the 'veto' power in the United Nations Security Council (often, as the lone supportive voice) to rescue Israel from formal condemnations and sanctions.

Additionally, Washington DC has been the only permanent member of the UNSC to recognise Golan Heights (taken from Syria in the Six-Day War in 1967) as legitimate Israeli territory, recognised the provocative move of recognising Jerusalem as the official capital and shifted its embassy there (thus diluting Palestinian claims), amongst many other symbolic moves that embolden the unilateral approach of the Israelis.

Such underlying equations and compulsions have defined the foreign policy of the US towards Israeli reprisals to the terror attack by the Hamas from Gaza.

While the world had rightly condemned the Hamas terror attack, it had differentiated between the Hamas and the larger comity of Gazans or Palestinians. Israel didn't, and it lumped the Hamas identity onto the entirety of Gazans/Palestinians and conducted its revenge accordingly.

If only the Israelis had conducted 'targeted' attacks against the Hamas - as Israel had historically conducted against militias like the PLO, Hezbollah or

even the Hamas earlier, there would not have been a global uproar. But the Israelis opted for the brutal 'scorched earth' approach.

Today, there are over 35,000 Palestinians (not necessarily Hamas operatives) who have been killed in the disproportionate revenge, besides the complete flattening of the Gaza Strip.

Whatever be the mealy-mouthed and flipflopping statements by the Joe Biden administration since 7 October 2023, when the Hamas attack took place, the US has had a direct hand in the massacre of the hapless Gazans.

So, what guided the invaluable and questionable US support to Israeli revenge? A potent combination of history, realpolitik, invariable pressures from the 'Jewish lobby', and above all, electoral considerations in an election year!

Initially, the reaction was wrapped in 'justness' and noble outrage. But the fact is that President Biden would have seen the benefit in tilting towards Israel (beyond reasonableness) to arrest the recent drift of Jews towards Republicans, especially towards Trump personally, who had pivoted completely in favour of Netanyahu's Israel during his term with the Abraham Accords, scraping the Iran Nuclear Deal, 'Muslim-Ban' et al.

But over time as the Israeli onslaught in Gaza continued with no restraint or heed, Biden was seen as a willful accomplice to the disproportionate retaliation and bloodshed.

The excessiveness of Israeli actions has pricked the con-

science of the youth and the recent uproars, protests, and disruptions on Western university campuses are a testimony to a contra-reaction after the genuine condemnation of the Hamas attack.

Even many of the younger Jewish voters don't see unequivocal or blind support for Israel as a litmus test for their personal identity, anymore. Many Jews recognise the direct contribution of Israeli actions on the sudden rise of anti-Semitic incidents and many are concerned about the economic consequences to their livelihoods - suddenly supporting Israel blindly does not make sense, even to them.

Secondly, the youth, ethnic diversities, and other progressive communities who make the bulk of the Democrat ranks are equally alarmed at Biden's blank cheque to Israel.

These tectonic undercurrents in Democrat constituencies and the Jewish lobby have forced a rethink on Biden's approach towards Israel. It is sheer electoral politics and not morality that is driving Biden's U-turn, after a painfully long time. The optics of 'encouraging' Israel are detrimental to Biden's campaign.

The irrelevance of morality also numbs the American electorate in another way, when they see American 'support' to Israel or Ukraine as prohibitively unnecessary, especially as the US economy itself is struggling. After two 'vetoes' to support Israel, the US finally supported a resolution condemning Israeli overdrive.

The narrative and discourse will now further change beyond stopping arms supplies and investigations into Israeli excesses and an ostensible 'blockade' to humanitarian supplies.

But again, it validates the age-old truism that it is electoral stakes and not morality that drives US foreign policy, whatever be the purported diplomatic line or posturing.

Moral righteousness has been the presented face of the foreign policy of the United States of America since time immemorial. But beyond this thin and untenable veneer lurks the dark reality of realpolitik, power play, and even naked ambition at work. Such practicality driving sovereign behaviour is not unusual to any other country, except that the postured pretense of altruism driving American actions, when it isn't, annoys other countries. Americans often don't practice what they preach, or posture. However political correctness couched with deft word-smithing hides the real impulses and instincts that have legitimised America's dalliances with dictators, illiberal monarchs, or other unsavoury alliances. The relationship of Washington DC with the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid i.e., Israel, is one such glaring contradiction, even though Israel remains the most sanctioned country in the world, by the United Nations.

Beyond the stakes and understandable impact of roughly 8-9 million Jews in the United States (with imagined emotions attached to Israel) and their accompanying heft of economic value in terms of 'controlling' Wall Street, media houses and the US economy is general, the state of Israel affords incalculable strategic leverage to the US in global affairs.

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Visit to shape direction of China-Europe future

President Xi Jinping's just-concluded visit to Europe could not have been more timely - it came at a pivotal moment and underscored the profound significance of China-Europe relations amid global uncertainties. His first overseas visit in 2024 and third state visit to France not only emphasized the strategic importance of China's relations with Europe, the European Union in particular, but also highlights the symbolic power inherent in such diplomatic engagements.

His visit also underscored the strategic significance of Europe for China on multiple fronts. First, Europe remains a crucial economic partner of China, with the EU being one of China's largest trading partners and the investment flow between the two sides being substantial. Strengthening ties with key EU member states such as France and Hungary, and other European states such as Serbia, enhances mutual access to two of the world's largest markets and high-tech powerhouses, fostering mutual economic development.

CHINADAILY

guard their respective interests and promote peace-building efforts. China's support for the EU's efforts to maintain its strategic autonomy shows it views the bloc as a strong upholder of multilateralism and an indispensable partner in mitigating geopolitical risks. For China, its engagement with Europe is integral to its broader foreign policy objectives, which include the Belt and Road Initiative, and the advocacy for improved connectivity and multilateralism. Beyond its strategic implications, President Xi's visit showcased China's maturing diplomatic prowess and international standing through its unwavering commitment to constructive engagement in the post-pandemic world.

The Chinese leader's well-calibrated choice of destinations - France, Serbia and Hungary - reflects China's desire to cultivate partnerships and promote cooperation with Europe as a whole. France, under Charles de Gaulle's leadership, established diplomatic relations with China 60 years ago, much before most other Western countries. The Gaullist idea of independence, from which the concept of strategic autonomy derives its vision and ambition, has directly or indirectly guided France's approach to Sino-French relations. The approach is underpinned by a mutual recognition of each other's status as major players in a multipolar world. This strategic consensus has steered their foreign policies and facilitated high-level dialogue, ensuring the Sino-French partnership remains resilient even during challenging times. France has constantly played a key role in shaping overall EU-China ties and partnered China in addressing global challenges, from climate change to the application of AI. Serbia and Hungary are widely considered China's closest economic partners in Europe. They are also among the first group of countries to join the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, and they host a substantial number of Chinese-invested projects, from large-scale railway infrastructure projects to electric vehicle battery plants.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

A polymathic beacon

SIR, The lamentation echoed across the globe upon the passing of Dr. James Simons in May 2024. His departure marked not merely the loss of a luminary, but the extinguishing of a polymathic beacon whose radiance illuminated the realms of mathematics, finance, and benevolence alike.

Simons' genesis was marked by an insatiable thirst for intellectual inquiry. With an erudition unparalleled, he plumbed the depths of mathematics, particularly the esoteric realms of geometry and topology, unearthing profound revelations that reverberate across myriad scientific disciplines. His seminal contributions, notably in the labyrinthine domain of string theory and the arcane recesses of condensed matter physics, bespoke a mind unfettered by convention, charting new constellations in the firmament of human understanding.

Yet, Simons' magisterial intellect knew no bounds, transcending the ivory towers of academia to embrace the tumultuous seas of

finance. Co-founding Renaissance Technologies in 1978, he embarked upon a voyage of audacious innovation, harnessing the arcane arts of quantitative analysis to divine the hidden rhythms of financial markets. RenTech's ascendance to eminence, propelled by Simons' visionary stewardship, heralded a paradigm shift in investment philosophy, ushering forth an era wherein algorithms supplanted intuition and data reigned supreme.

However, Simons' luminosity extended beyond the rarefied atmospheres of academia and the frenetic milieu of finance, radiating also in the domain of philanthropy. Alongside his esteemed consort Marilyn, he assumed the mantle of beneficence, endowing the Simons Foundation with prodigious largesse.

Through this august institution, they dispensed patronage to the cause of scientific inquiry and educational advancement, nurturing the saplings of intellect that might blossom into arbors of enlightenment. In the annals of human endeavour, the saga of Dr.

James Simons stands as a testament to the boundless potential of the human intellect. His was a life suffused with the incandescent glow of curiosity and the indefatigable pursuit of truth. Beyond the mortal coil, his legacy endures, an eternal testament to the transformative power of knowledge and the indomitable spirit of inquiry.

Yours, etc., Amarjeet kumar, Hazaribagh.

HOPE IN J&K

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Srinagar's way" (15 May). The high voter turnout and peaceful conduct of the ongoing elections in J&K, particularly in the Valley, signify a significant step towards democratic renewal in the region after the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of J&K in 2019. The heartening turnout of 38 per cent in Srinagar - a leap from 14.43 per cent in 2019 - signals faith in the electoral process despite the socio-political complexities of the state-turned-UT. That the 2024 General Election is being held here without any call

DANGEROUS

SIR, In April, the first batch of 64 Indian workers was sent to Israel as part of a bilateral plan that began last year between Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Modi. After Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, some 150,000 Palestinian workers from the West Bank and another 18,500 from the Gaza Strip, who were working in Israel lost their work permits. High salaries attract Indian workers to sign such contracts. Surprisingly, on the one side, following Iranian missile strikes on Israel on April 13, the Indian government issued a travel advisory for Indian citizens in Israel, to "restrict their movements to the minimum" yet the agreement remained in operation and Indian workers are treated as disposable casualties of war. In fact, Israel is not the only country where Indian workers face dangerous conditions. On March 5, a 31-year-old worker named Pat Nibin Maxwell was killed instantly in a Hezbollah missile attack. Under this extenuating situation, the Union government should cancel the agreement with Israel.

Yours, etc., S K Koshla, Chandigarh, 14 May.

for boycott after decades is reflective of a growing desire among the people to actively engage in shaping their future.

However, challenges persist, especially in bridging the trust deficit between the Kashmiri polity and the Central Government.

The successful conduct of elections should serve as a catalyst for the restoration of state-

hood, as promised by Prime Minister Modi during his poll rally in Udhampur last month.

All stakeholders must seize the momentum and work towards building a more inclusive and representative governance framework that addresses the aspirations of the people.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 15 May.



More heat than light in wealth tax debate

SABYASACHEE DASH AND CHETAN CHANDGOTHA

Lately, the debate over wealth taxation has intensified, with proponents arguing for its role in addressing income inequality and funding social programmes. However, implementing a wealth tax is not without its challenges and drawbacks.

The "Proponents" and "Detractors" were sharply divided even when the debate of retention and abolition of Wealth Tax was at its peak till one fine day when the tax under reference was repealed, through Budget 2016-17 to be precise.

Dating back centuries, a tax on accumulated wealth has roots in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome which imposed taxes on property acquired and inherited. Rome used to levy the Patrimonium tax on the total wealth of its citizens. Feudal societies in medieval Europe relied on wealth taxes to fund wars and support monarchies. France, as a European monarchy, collected 'the taille,' a direct tax on households based on the amount of land held.

In the UK, estate duties were introduced to combat rising wealth inequality during the industrialization of the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it is in the aftermath of World Wars I and II that wealth tax grew to prominence with the introduction of federal estate and gift taxes by the United States in the early 20th century.

With the advent of the 21st century, countries scaled back owing to the insignificant contribution to the overall tax revenues, administrative



challenges and concerns about the economic impact.

"King must collect tax like honey-bee, enough to sustain but not too much to destroy", said Chanakya

India introduced wealth tax in 1957. Over time, the tax base eroded, compliance became challenging, and inefficient collection led to the abolition of the wealth tax in 2015. The consequential loss to the exchequer was sought to be subrogated through levy of additional surcharge on the "super rich" under the existing tax regime.

Taxing property unfairly penalizes only a select few. This form of tax often leads to double taxation, first when the money is earned and second on the asset acquired with the tax suffered earning. The State should not dictate the virtuous usage of one's own money.

India aims to become a \$5 trillion economy in the next three

years with a vision to be an 'economic powerhouse' by 2047. The fact that this aspiration can never be translated to reality without the active support of the so called 'ultra-rich' i.e., the businesspeople, industrialists and the like, can hardly be overstated. High-net-worth individuals may alter their investment strategies, asset allocation, or even residency to avoid taxes and protect their assets. It could distort economic behavior by disincentivizing investment, entrepreneurship, and wealth accumulation. Such taxes could lead to reduced investment potential, further undermining economic competitiveness and distorting economic decision-making.

A policy flip-flop environment takes a toll on the trust and confidence with enduring economic development being the casualty. It discourages work, savings, capital formation,

potentially hindering innovation and productivity.

Advocates push forward the need to redistribute resources to reduce poverty and promote inclusive growth under the cover of the ability-to-pay principle but with alternative options available and working, taxing the wealthy may be counter intuitive.

Normatively, the tax policies across jurisdictions are guided by Taxation Doctrines in relation to source, residency, holding, recipient etc. However the essential features peculiar to a State are influenced by the economic model of the day. Tax as an instrument is used by the state depending on the chosen governance model, which brings the conversation of Capitalism v/s. Socialism to the fore.

Capitalism emphasises on 'Increased Production' whereas Socialism focuses on 'Fairer Distribution.' It is a matter of fact that India embraced the socialist model for its economic governance till the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century when LPG reforms were rolled out and empirical evidence suggests that in the first four decades after independence more poverty was created than wealth.

The shift from the Socialist model to a near Capitalist model (Hybrid system) continues to exert its profound implications on almost all segments of the economy including taxation.

When we adopted a new economic belief as a nation that rejects most of the old model's principles and favors the opposite framework, it is fair and wise to create policies that align with the new programme. Specifically, under this renewed

model, solely using tactics to discourage or single out the wealthy as a primary fiscal tool to pursue a socialist agenda could disrupt the current situation and also be subject to ethical and moral objections. Any deviation even if an aberration would be a negation of the model-in-vogue.

As a corollary, holding a few responsible for the inequalities that exist could legitimize Marxism's assertion that Capitalism inherently breeds severe economic disparities, justifying the criminal actions of the disadvantaged as a response. Small wonder, such ideologies have failed to elicit acceptance even in jurisdictions where welfarism remains a formidable article of faith.

Besides these two universally acknowledged models, there exists a third model by the name of "Restrained Consumption" that was introduced by late Pt. Deendayal Upadhyaya as part of his seminal treatise titled "Integral Humanism". The text opposes Unbridled Consumerism by drawing inspiration from Indian culture. In hindsight the concept resonates well with all the aspects that are actively debated under the overarching Climate/Environment Protection.

While the goals of wealth taxation are laudable, its re-entry is likely to bring significant challenges and risks. It could undermine economic efficiency, exacerbate capital flight, and tax evasion. Policymakers must carefully weigh these considerations and explore alternative approaches to address income inequality and promote fiscal sustainability.

(The writers are practising chartered accountants.)

OCCASIONAL NOTE

EVERY effort to combat malaria is to be welcomed, and a little pamphlet by Mr. Girindrakrishna Mitra, of 5, Nur Mohammad Lane, Calcutta, which has just appeared with a commendatory foreword by Sir Kailash Chandra Bose, merits attention if only because it indicates a desire to pass from vague generalities to constructive proposals. Taking one point only, Mr. Mitra submits a plan for the establishment of village dispensaries, with practitioners attached to them, which might, perhaps, help to meet the demand for rural medical aid. He suggests that with Rs. 500 it might be possible to start a small dispensary for, a group of four or five villages and provide a monthly allowance of Rs. 25 for a "qualified or half-qualified" doctor during a period of six months, after which, the dispensary would be expected to contribute to his maintenance. Mr. Mitra thinks the doctor might obtain board and lodging in the house of some well-to-do resident in return for his services, and that, with private practice together with a commission on dispensary sales, he might make his living. Other points touched upon by Mr. Mitra—the work of local authorities, co-operative societies, anti-malaria measures, popular education in sanitary matters—are all of obvious importance; and there will be general agreement with his plea for getting something definite accomplished without waiting for ideals. He claims that his proposals have at least the merit of being practicable without entailing heavy expenditure.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

BENGAL COUNCIL VACANCY

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STATESMAN"
SIR,—In reference to the letter published by you on Wednesday over the signature STRANDED JELLYFISH I also came away from the European Association meeting on Tuesday evening last feeling that one of the candidates, Mr. James, found himself in a peculiar quandary.

With the political atmosphere as it is at present the European Constituency must select as their representatives on the Council gentlemen who will keep before them, and protect to the best of their ability, the interests of the European section of the community which are, and will possibly in the future be, subject to a good deal of direct attack.

Mr. James' replies to his hecklers as to his position in the event of his views as a member of Council clashing with those of his directors in the Y. M. C. A. were unconvincing and not at all satisfactory. Mr. James stated that, in the event of a difference of opinion arising between himself and his Directors on this other. Which is it to be?

There does not seem to be any object in the European constituency returning a member who may be called upon by his employers to resign from the Council at any moment unless the European group in the Councils who are openly supporting his candidature would be prepared to take him over as a full time secretary, in which case he would not be a free agent and would find it difficult to express the views of his constituents if these were not approved of by this group.

I should like to ask Mr. James whether his views hitherto have accorded with those expressed by the European Association, and for how long he has been a member of that body.

Canny Shoot
Calcutta, May 9.

VANDALISM IN THE DARJEELING DISTRICT

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STATESMAN"
SIR,—I first visited the Darjeeling District in the year 1889, when things were very different to what they now are. The town itself was a very different one and beautifully wooded. As time went along naturally the builder was busy, and the present town took the place of the wooded and beautiful slopes. That, of course, had to be, but at the same time a lot was done to make the place attractive in appearance so as to attract sightseers and others. The surrounding district remained in a state of nature, and everyone who visited the district was enchanted with the beauty of the forests full of orchids, ferns, etc., and the varied colouring. The giant trees, hundreds of years old, covered with moss, coloured ferns and orchids were a glorious sight and particularly so in spring and autumn. Now, however, all this is changing. The axe rings all round. The giants of the forest come crashing down and a general clearance is taking place. These glorious trees are turned into charcoal and fire wood for the most part, and nobody seems to care that the face of the country is changing. The Forest Department, who presumably care for nothing but money getting, are ruining these beauty spots, and I am led to understand the woods are to be replanted with one tree only, namely, the sombre cryptomeria. All the glory of the forest will have departed. Birds, beasts and flowers all have to go. Surely someone can put a stop to this before the whole landscape is ruined. Can nothing be done to stop this sort of vandalism?

Settler
Darjeeling, May 10

Brinkmanship with India won't help Nepal

ANURAG ACHARYA

In June 2020, Nepal's Parliament ratified a new political map of the country, including geographical territories that were and still remain under the control of India. While some areas in the new map, especially the Kalapani region, were already a subject of dispute between the two countries, the communist government under Khadga Prasad Oli used its two-third parliamentary majority to include areas as far as Limpiyadhura unilaterally. For those who care to look at historical evidence, Nepal had never asserted its claim over Limpiyadhura, which was a territory lost after the Sugauli treaty of 1816. It was only in context to the existing dispute over the origin of the Kali river, which forms an international boundary in the treaty, that Nepal has claimed the Kalapani region and Lipulekh as its territory. India is cognisant of Nepal's claim, and there is a joint committee looking at these boundary claims, with dialogue also happening at the Foreign Ministry level.

Oli's move in 2020 was not sudden. He had advisors who clearly understood that Nepal did not fulfil the prerequisites for a sovereign claim over most of those territories under international law, which mandates physical control of the territory with a resident population under active governance. In fact, the only claim that merits a mention, and which Nepal has strongly put across to India, is the credible evidence regarding Nepal governing the villages in the Kalapani region until a few decades back. Specifications of the evidence aside, what is clear is Nepal's claims in the Kalapani region have been acknowledged by India and well-documented by the



joint committee.

When Oli came to power after the 2017 elections, he was riding on the wave of hyper-nationalism he had managed to stoke in the aftermath of the 2015 Indian blockade. While the Madhesh-based parties had indeed initiated the border obstruction to pressure Kathmandu's political centre into conceding to their demands on the new constitution, the Narendra Modi government that had just come to power in New Delhi was blamed for actively enforcing the blockade. This is a claim India continues to deny. Whatever the truth, the blockade provided an opportune moment for Oli, whose political career was ailing at the time. He not only managed to sideline his bête noire, Madhav Kumar Nepal, inside the party but he also struck a deal with politically insecure Pushpa Kamal Dahal to cobble up a two-thirds majority in the 2017 elections. What happened next has continued to haunt Nepal's relationship with India.

Oli, of all the communist leaders of his generation, best understands that if there is one issue that could

mobilise the population across the country, it is the collective sense of insecurity against what people perceive to be India's over-reach and micro-management of Nepali politics. An average Nepali consumes Indian products, watches Bollywood movies, and supports an IPL team, all the while disdaining what they consider Indian interference in Nepali affairs.

To be fair, such a mindset is not uncommon in a relationship between two countries that are disproportionate in geography, demography, economy, or military capability. The tendency of the political class to weaponise public sentiments and insecurity against a larger neighbour for domestic electoral politics is not uncommon either. Autocratic and populist regimes across the world have consolidated their hold over power by stoking hate or fear against a perceived enemy state, painting their domestic opposition as weak and incapable of defending national interests. The definition of the enemy state and the national interests, in such cases, are often dictated by those in

power to suit their divisive politics.

When Oli refused to concede party or government leadership, Pushpa Kamal Dahal wrecked the mighty two-thirds government with the help of the disgruntled Madhav Kumar Nepal faction. Nepali Congress had no issues cashing in on this division, allowing the party's president, Sher Bahadur Deuba, to become the Prime Minister in July 2021. Upon becoming premier, Deuba and his coalition partner Dahal did all they could to normalise the relationship with New Delhi.

There was little talk about the controversial map or the Eminent Persons' Group (EPG) report, which had both become irritants in the bilateral relationship. After the 2022 elections, when Dahal became prime minister, New Delhi reciprocated by supporting Nepal's ambitions to invest in large infrastructures and export power in the Indian market and potentially to Bangladesh. In doing so, New Delhi expected to regain some of the trust it had lost after the 2015 blockade.

But Oli is a seasoned politician, a political maverick who can see two steps ahead of his competitors. He sensed Dahal's distrust of his coalition partners, his personal anxieties and insecurity about the future of his party, which he felt was dealt an under-hand during the division of electoral seats. China, which had openly helped in cobbling up the previous left unity, has been more cautious this time.

But there is plenty to read between frequent delegations shuttling between Kathmandu and Beijing over the past year. In any case, Oli convinced Dahal to leave the Nepali Congress coalition and continue in power with UML's support, with a vague promise of a long-term (elec-

toral) partnership. Upendra Yadav's Janata Samajwadi Party and the newly established Rastriya Swatantra Party were offered attractive cabinet positions in exchange for their support as well. Yadav, though, has left the coalition after the split of his party.

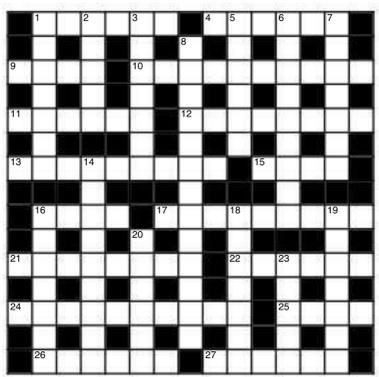
If Pushpa Kamal Dahal believes that the UML chairman took all the trouble of bringing down the NC-led coalition just to watch the game from the sidelines, he needs to change his advisors. Oli may have generously allowed Dahal to continue on the throne, but it is clear who is setting the rules of the game. The recent decision by the current government to include Nepal's new map in its currency note has Oli's footprints all over it. However, his brinkmanship with India could have serious ramifications for the country. Not only will such misadventures jeopardise Nepal's crucial economic interests, especially in the cross-border energy market where the private sector has invested billions of dollars, the ambition to access the trade route to Bangladesh and further east will not see the light of the day.

As the war in Ukraine drags on and the conflict in Gaza worsens, Washington is already zooming out from the Indo-Pacific region. This could provide a much-needed conducive environment for a rapprochement between New Delhi and Beijing, something Indian Prime Minister Modi has hinted at recently. Nepali communists must read the changing geopolitical horizon and understand the days of playing one neighbour against the other may not last for long. Nepal is better off drawing complementarities in its relationship with the two neighbours, allowing them to compete for economic interests on its own terms.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292782



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

PORTMANTEAUWORD
RELIEVE MISTSTEP
OCTET LACHRYMAL
DORIS OEALE
IMPROMPTU WELLL
CUNIONER
AMEN INTERRUPT
SIAVITERMERGH
YAKBUTTER
SIAVITERMERGH
TIDDEST INVOGUE
EONAH
MUSICULOSKELETAL

ACROSS

- Surprisingly mobile blood clots (6)
- Statement about rule applied to eggs (6)
- Cover old swimming pool (4)
- Pad in which Frenchman entertains partner for the evening (4-5)
- Swimming race interrupted by American with recording equipment (6)
- Damage ring at a Spanish resort (8)

- Teacher's favourites covering clear iodine with hot piece of lab equipment (5,4)
- Fictional bear's an adherent of Hindu philosophical system (6)
- Soldiers returned with new evidence (4)
- Unionist line adopted by Arab nation (9)
- A short stick found during search of burial site (8)
- Animal coming back with tailless bird (6)
- Temporary transfer for Next employees close to retirement (10)
- Spend money to secure Lessing's first dramatic work (4)

- Doctor given advantage in search for oysters? (6)
- Police officers let suspect get spirit (6)
- Remove hair from pie cooked near the end of the night (7)
- Pound returned by Fair English fellow (5)
- Boy clutching map of North European region (7)
- Good artist following through with drug (6)
- Octopus originally caught in net close to of sea left with a sad expression (9)

- Germanic siren featuring in folklore leitmotif (7)
- Dancing bears seem ill prepared at beginning of scene in musical (3,10)
- Doctor and old lady taking part in tiresome process (9)
- Notice allegedly found next to small opening in dense vegetation (7)
- Sleepwear's close to neckwear (7)
- It's set in stone to cause trouble (7)
- Greedy type welcoming time to prepare snack (3,3)
- Extremely destructive drug found in storage facility (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Unifying Paradise

Pointing to people's anger and civil unrest in PoK, Amit Shah says it will be reclaimed as part of India

As peace and tranquility envelop the sylvan slopes of Kashmir Valley in perfect harmony but civil unrest recoils with its squirming populace across the LoC in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK), India's Home Minister Amit Shah has iterated that the region "belongs to India and we will reclaim it". Nothing new there, but the comment has reignited discussions on the disputed region and its intricate history, fraught as it is with serious ramifications. Following Partition, the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, like other such States, had the option to accede to either India or Pakistan. Maharaja Hari Singh, then ruler of Jammu and Kashmir, initially sought to remain independent but, amid invasion by tribal militias supported by Pakistan, opted to accede to India in October 1947. It led to the first India-Pakistan War, which saw a United Nations-brokered ceasefire and establishment of the LoC, which divided the region into the Indian J&K and PoK. While India gained control over most of the territory, Pakistan retained approximately its one-third, which it named Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan. Therefore, from an Indian perspective, PoK is an integral part of J&K and its inclusion in India's territorial claims is based on historical, legal and moral grounds. However, the timing and practicality of the Home Minister's claim are debatable: Bringing up such critical matters in public sphere, especially during elections and when they involve a neighbouring nuclear power, is not the best of ideas.

For its part, Pakistan considers PoK as a "liberated territory" pending a plebiscite promised by the UN. In this given situation, the status quo maintained for over seven decades keeps the two countries from going to war. The larger question is, do we want to go to war with Pakistan and can we afford it when we have so much to sort out domestically? Should not the Home Minister be more cautious in raking up such contentious issues during elections? It is true that despite Pakistan's hollow assertions, PoK has witnessed internal dissent and unrest over the years. The region has been marred by allegations of human rights abuses, lack of democratic freedoms and marginalisation of local voices by the Pakistani establishment. Civil society movements, such as the Gilgit-Baltistan Movement, have been advocating for the recognition of their rights and the restoration of genuine autonomy. If Amit Shah's recent declaration reaffirming India's claim over PoK is not a standalone Statement but reflects a broader strategic shift in India's approach, it must be well articulated and a clear roadmap must be laid to approach the matter diplomatically or otherwise. If that is not the case, then it would pass off as another poll rhetoric or 'jumla'. Indeed, diplomatic endeavours are most effectively conducted behind closed doors rather than at public rallies.

PICTALK



Devotees at the Kedarnath temple during the 'Char Dham Yatra,' in Rudrapur

The rising significance of skills in learning

The new educational landscape must integrate skill-based learning into formal education systems, fostering a holistic approach to learning and livelihood



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Each generation does make its contribution to the vocabulary of the language it uses. The vocabulary represents its understanding of the current emotions and fancied expressions of sentiments, which are at times as old as the human race. This may be of joy, glee, or sheer 'inaction'.

At times serious sentiments are involved and led by a prominent person of the time; they acquire fancied importance. Many will recall the time when the Department of Education in the Government of India was declared the 'Department of HRD' during the time of the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi and overnight many departments of personnel of corporate enterprises declared themselves to be the departments of human resource development. Nothing in the content had changed nor had even the approach, but still the fashion had got its new draping.

Each time somebody important in a current scenario projects a concept, there are a lot of people who follow the trail. Nothing wrong with that. The important thing is to understand how human nature moves and what the significance of words is in the larger context of those particular times. It is best to do an analysis without making a value judgement. Having said that, one can come to the present times and notice how the emphasis of the present dispensation in the national arena on 'skill' has brought the word skill to the center of the focus in learning.

There are attempts to offer degrees for certain types of skill formation. Some decades ago, skill was not such a happy word. No vice chancellor of a university would have talked of a degree in 'skills'. Education was supposed to be a 'grand concept', which indeed it is. The confusion with skill was, albeit, reducing its significance of the grandeur of the process of education. To enter that debate may not be helpful at this stage. The fact of the matter is that times have now changed and skills have acquired the level of an elevated pursuit. As mentioned earlier, there are attempts to offer



degrees in skill formation. Perhaps this is a recognition of the emphasis on doable learning. Anything which can be performed in action is now getting more valued.

By itself, it may or may not be a good thing, but it does show a tendency to reducing action largely to an operational front. The neglect, therefore, of concepts and ideas is proportional. By itself, the subject matter may be debated, but that remains, as the expression goes, 'another matter'. This is inevitable and leads to some reflections. Skill by itself is important and perhaps far more important than the value attached to it in everyday parleys.

Skill is the foundation of all relationships. If one is attracted towards anyone else, it is only on the basis of that person's skills. That skill may be in singing, cooking, speaking or dancing and the list can be endless. The truth is, nobody was drawn to anybody else, if that other person had no skills. Even a parent is drawn to a child, only at some action of the child, even if it was just a smile. That is how important a skill is. Without a smile, the child would draw no attention. Any adult sees a child seeks to establish some communication with that child and that child's response is the core of the attention it gets from anyone



LIKE ANY OTHER DEGREE, A DEGREE IN SKILLS CAN LEAD TO EARNINGS AND A LIVELIHOOD. THIS IS NEW TO THE LANDSCAPE. THERE IS MORE TO EARN AND MORE WAYS TO EARN WITH IT THAN BEFORE. THIS HAS WIDENED AND DEEPENED THE NATURE OF LEARNING, WHICH BY POPULAR PARLEYS HAS BEEN ADDRESSED AS 'EDUCATION'

around him. Later, that kind of interaction becomes the root of learning communication and more.

This seminal position of skill in human relationships has not often been noticed, either with analytical fervor or poetic exuberance. If that had been done, there would have been greater recognition that nothing, not even emotional bonding, takes place without some skill being the foundation of it. Be that as it may, it is an additional dimension of playfulness, friendship and relationships and from there it goes on to earning and livelihood.

What is happening today is the induction of this skill formation into a standardised format like education leading to a degree. Today even skill in laying bricks in construction can get the status of a degree. A degree is indeed nothing but the benchmarking of standards. Similarly, there is even a proposition on degree in acting and more.

In other words, like any other degree, a degree in skills can lead to earnings and a livelihood. This is new on the landscape. There is more to earn and more ways to earn with it than before. This has widened and deepened the nature of learning, which by popular parleys has been addressed as 'education'. The industry, if one might say so,

of education has its own components, which are widely understood but not equally commonly categorised in our operational terms. Such being the case, a time may have come to categorise different types of learning and different types of skills. It is this component of education which needs greater thought and analysis than has been done so far for 'education' leading to a degree.

It may, therefore, be a fit proposition to submit that to understand 'skills' as a part of learning, one needs to begin the overhaul of the learning process with an overhaul of the learning process of degree in 'education' itself. Operationally this could mean, to begin with, the review of the curriculum of the B.Ed. and M.Ed degree. It is generally agreed that conceptual reflection to be converted into operational reality requires a fulcrum point of intervention. In the text above, the philosophical reflection on skill has been sought to be combined with the world of action and research. This could be a point to be seriously taken on board for further discussion and action.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AAP'S CANDID ADMISSION

Madam — This relates to the news story "AAP admits to assault," which was published on May 15. While the action of the CM's PS Bibhav Kumar is condemnable, to say the least, the very admission of the act by the AAP's leader Sanjay Singh is a rare instance of admission of guilt. It is reassuring to note that the party has promised to take strict action against its own. Contrast this with how a well-entrenched party (the BJP), which hopes for a "chaar so paar" score in the LS polls, stood by Brij Bhushan Saran Singh, despite a barrage of sexual allegations against him, only to give the LS sabbha ticket to his son, as some kind of saving grace.

Though AAP has not yet acted on its promise, the admission of wrongdoing has, by itself, lessons for all other parties that choose to look the other way when such incidents involve their party folk. For now, at least, it is the AAP and not the BJP, which is walking the talk on "Beti bachao".

Avinash Godbole | Dewas

DIGNIFIED CAMPAIGNING

Madam — Apropos the editorial "Bitter ballot battle," published on May 15. The ongoing Lok Sabha elections may go down as the most bitterly fought yet, in the history of independent India. Senior citizens like this writer cannot help but recall a time when politicians were dignified in fighting opponents during election campaigning. For instance, during the 1969, assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, when the Congress stalwart Kamaraj thundered that he would win from Virudhunagar constituency 'lying down', Rajaji retorted, "His lying down is a certainty, but winning is difficult!" Rajaji's Swatantra party and the DMK fought that election in alliance, resulting in the Congress defeat and the DMK forming Government.

Differences cropped up between Rajaji and Anna. Said a disillusioned Rajaji in a press meet — "The honeymoon between the Swatantra party and the DMK is over!" When Annadurai heard this, he quipped — "Yes, the honeymoon is over and fam-

Ageing gracefully



Apropos the news article "Embracing the joys and wisdom of age," published on 16 May, this is my response. Reflecting on the passage of time and the shifting perspectives it brings, one can't help but marvel at the journey of life. The writer's experience in the mountains, juxtaposed with encounters that touch upon age, paints a poignant picture of acceptance and

growth. The narrative resonates with the universal theme of ageing, gracefully navigating the transition from youth to seniority. Initially resistant to notions of age, the writer's attitude evolves, finding solace and even pride in the title of 'old'. The seismic impact of the pandemic serves as a sobering reminder of life's fragility, prompting a deeper appreciation for each passing year.

Amidst reflections on personal experiences, there's a poignant call to action - a reminder of the responsibilities that accompany ageing. It's a testament to the profound impact one can have on others, echoing Frank Lloyd Wright's sentiment that life's beauty amplifies with age. In a world often fixated on youth, this narrative serves as a gentle reminder of the richness that comes with embracing the journey of ageing, with all its complexities and rewards.

Khirabdi | Noida

ily life has begun!" Again, in 1976, Loknayak J P Narayan, who was arrested during the emergency, campaigned relentlessly for the Janata Party. But soon thereafter, one of the first persons to call on the vanquished Mrs Gandhi was JP. After the meeting, when press reporters sought a Statement from him, JP said "I wish Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a brighter future than her bright past!" We have had leaders like Rajaji, Kamaraj and JP, who fought their political opponents with might, but without ever hating them, indulging in personal vilification or mudslinging. Will we ever see their likes again?

V Jayaraman | Chennai

NEPAL'S CURRENCY NOTE ISSUE

Madam — India-Nepal relationship has had its highs and lows. Being a demographically close neighbour, the tiny Himalayan country has always been wary about India's might. Though India has been quick to respond to the devastating earthquakes that rock Nepal with frightening frequencies, Kathmandu was sore with the insensitive reporting of ground realities by some

television channels during a major earthquake. The Madhesi agitation had further strained bilateral relations resulting in Nepal's outreach to China. Overall, New Delhi's inability to keep up the tempo of goodwill has irked Kathmandu. The recent decision of the Pushpa Kamal Dahal Government to depict the controversial India-Nepal-China tri-junction on its currency notes has raised eyebrows in Indian diplomatic circles. It is widely felt that apart from traditional issues, Kathmandu's unhappiness with New Delhi over a few crucial projects not taking off, or not being maintained after being inked, could be among the few triggers for its currency notes step. Both countries should display maturity to ensure that the negative influence of Beijing does not cast a shadow on mutual friendship. The currency note issue should be resolved soon after the elections for peace and stability in the region.

Ganapathi Bhat | Akola

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Modi filing nomination boosts BJP morale

Varanasi electrified as Narendra Modi filed papers, underscoring UP's centrality and Modi-Yogi alliance's lasting impact on national politics



VIVEK SHUKLA

Varanasi recently witnessed a surge of excitement as Prime Minister Modi filed his nomination papers for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. This event not only underscored the significance of Uttar Pradesh in shaping national politics but also highlighted the enduring influence of the Modi-Yogi partnership in the State's political landscape. The ancient city of Varanasi buzzed with excitement as Prime Minister Narendra Modi submitted his nomination papers for the Lok Sabha polls once again last Tuesday. Accompanied by his trusted ally, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and a host of supporters, Modi's presence electrified the streets during a massive roadshow prior to filing his papers. The atmosphere in the holy city exuded confidence among leaders and workers of the saffron party, indicating a strong belief in their impending triumph in the Lok Sabha polls. The significance of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in determining the fate of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, cannot be overstated, especially as they



strive for a third consecutive term in power. With 80 Lok Sabha seats at stake, UP holds considerable sway over Indian politics, both present and future. The adage that the road to Delhi's throne runs through UP rings true, emphasising the pivotal role the State plays in shaping the country's political landscape. Consequently, political parties are sparing no effort in vying for victory in UP in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Despite political manoeuvres, analysts predict a familiar outcome in UP this time around, with the BJP poised to replicate its 2019 electoral success. The formidable duo of Modi and Yogi is expected to deliver another commanding performance, cementing their status as unbeatable political forces. The Modi-Yogi partnership has become synonymous with victory, casting a shadow of doubt

over the opposition's prospects. The BJP's ambitious goal of securing all 80 Lok Sabha seats in UP is buoyed by the confidence placed in this dynamic duo. Modi has lauded Yogi's development initiatives on numerous occasions, underscoring their collective vision for UP's progress. This sentiment was echoed during Modi's recent rally in Amroha, where he expressed optimism about surpassing previous electoral records under Yogi's leadership, thereby making history in UP. The 2014 Lok Sabha elections marked a turning point in UP's political landscape, ending the BJP's electoral drought in the State. Securing a staggering 71 out of 80 seats, the BJP emerged victorious without any significant opposition alliance.

The subsequent 2019 elections saw the BJP leverage the Modi wave and Yogi's governance to further consolidate its position, despite facing a united opposition front. Yogi's proactive stance on law and order issues resonated with voters, contributing to the BJP's resounding victory. Yogi's tenure as Chief Minister

has been characterised by a crackdown on criminal elements, instilling a sense of security among the populace. Under his leadership, UP has witnessed a significant decline in crime rates, marking a departure from the lawlessness of the past. Central Government support for development initiatives has further bolstered UP's economy, with the Gross State Domestic Product witnessing substantial growth. As the 2024 elections unfold, the BJP finds itself in a favourable position in UP, owing to the combined successes of the Modi Government at the centre and Yogi's governance model. The tangible improvements in governance and economic indicators serve as testaments to their administration's efficacy, instilling confidence among voters. While the outcome of the elections remains uncertain, one thing is clear: the Modi-Yogi alliance continues to enjoy unwavering support from the people of UP.

(The writer is a senior journalist and author of two books; his views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

INDIA AND IRAN SIGN CHABAHAR PORT PACT

A significant step for connecting the Indian Ocean to Europe and beyond



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

India and Iran finally managed to put a long-term contract closure for one of the most stretched flagship projects in the bilateral relationship between the countries. India managed to sign a ten-year Long-term Contract for the development of Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal, Chabahar. It was no surprise that, despite being in the middle of elections, Union Minister of Ports Shipping and Waterways Sarabandona Sonowal visited Chabahar port to witness the signing of this crucial bilateral agreement.

Chabahar is a deep water port, located nearest to India, which is crucial for India's access to central Asia and vice versa for the States in the region into the Indian Ocean. The Chabahar project first came up as a crucial bilateral platform for Iran and India in 2003 when PM Vajpayee and Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani, unveiled a transformational strategic cooperation blueprint between the two nations. Iran and India while getting closer on the bilateral, were focussed on securing Afghanistan and making it an important transit destination further into Central Asia. The Delhi Declaration of 2003, signed between Iran and India reiterates "The recent trilateral agreement between the Governments of India, Iran and Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar route through Melak, Zaranj and Delaram would facilitate regional trade and transit, including to Afghanistan and Central Asia, contributing thus to enhanced regional economic prosperity."



However, post the Vajpayee Government, India's focus on the crucial infrastructure project shifted, partially impacted by domestic politics and a new world order. It wasn't until Prime Minister Modi became the prime minister that this integrated multi-modal Chabahar project found prominence. Hectic backroom negotiations, including the visit of the Afghan President to India in 2015, followed by PM Modi's visit to Iran in 2016, the signing of the trilateral agreement provided the much-needed impetus to the project. It also involved close coordination with the US (which wasn't too keen on India's enthusiasm, with Chabahar), but the independent access to Afghanistan served as the crucial lynchpin to unblock the hesitancy.

In 2017 India, Iran and Afghanistan held the second ministerial-level trilateral meeting to get an update on the establishment of a transport and transit corridor in Chabahar. The Statement released after the trilateral Stated "Reiterating the importance of Chabahar as a hub for regional economic connectivity and their commitment to work towards this objective, the Ministers commended the joint efforts of the three countries in the recent successful transit of wheat from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar."

It was nearly seven years later that India got complete access to the Chabahar port for handling the crucial operations. It is important to be reminded that China has made significant progress in Central Asia by aggressively pursuing its Belt and Road initiative. Iranian President led a high-level economic delegation to China in February this year, while reiterating that China continues to be its largest trading partner. India's relations with Central Asian countries and further into Russia have been stable for decades. China has been a new entrant in the region which has first managed to acquire critical infrastructure projects in India's immediate neighbourhoods like Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc and is now in weather with Russia.

Iran has traditionally been a key influencer in the West Asian and Central Asian regions, however, the ongoing war in Gaza has revived old fault lines in the region. The US which withdrew from Afghanistan used to be a key decision-maker in the region and is keen to.

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

RBI fortifies the nation's economy with gold



SHIVAJI SARKAR

Taking a cue from prudent household savers, the Reserve Bank of India has significantly increased its gold reserves to 817 metric tonnes to hedge the economy



In a strategic move reminiscent of Indian households safeguarding their wealth, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is fortifying the nation's economic resilience by actively acquiring gold reserves. This bold initiative mirrors the prudence of household savers, as the central bank positions itself to shield itself against potential economic turmoil and bolster the country's financial stability.

The RBI now has accumulated gold reserves of 817 tonnes. This surge can be attributed to a combination of factors including escalating tensions in West Asia, Israel's assault on Palestine, the Russia-Ukraine war and persistent inflation, all of which have heightened the appeal of gold. Central banks worldwide are actively accumulating gold to diversify reserves and reduce dependency on the US dollar. China, in particular, has been on a gold-buying spree for the 17th consecutive month, aiming to hedge against currency depreciation and geopolitical risks. The world is unofficially going back to the gold standards it abandoned in 1971. India is also hit by a continuous six-day fall in the stock market. It wipes out a significant investment. The loss is estimated at Rs 7 lakh crore.

The household savers, of course, got their savings dipped as unemployment and rising prices hit them. The RBI in a clarificatory note on May 9, mentions that "they are putting their savings into real estate and the central bank is not worried of the phenomenon".

The bank itself has stepped up gold purchases to "help diversify its foreign exchange reserves base amid US dollar volatility". The US inflation rate in February hit 3.2 per cent year over year. Since the Federal Reserve began raising rates in 2022, it has raised rates from 5.25 per cent to 5.5 per cent in July 2023. It's

holding further raises given the US elections.

The price of gold has surged over 10 per cent since the start of the year, cementing its status as a preferred hedge against inflation and a sanctuary amid political and economic uncertainty. This significant uptick is largely due to considerable purchases by central banks and a rising demand for safe-haven assets.

Gold prices, in India, have been experiencing a significant surge in 2024, with a remarkable rally that has propelled them to an unprecedented all-time high of over Rs 73,000 per 10 gm two days before Akshaya Tritiya, when customary gold purchases reach a peak. This surge represents an impressive increase of approximately 21.1 per cent within just one year. On the day of Akshaya Tritiya on May 10, it has slightly dipped to Rs 72,788. Over six months, domestic gold prices surged from Rs 54,000 per 10 grams to a record high of Rs 73,958.

One can realise that nothing can appreciate faster than gold and can't question the RBI's sagacity. One dollar is at Rs 83.88. Rupee is expected to rise to Rs 82.50 in six months, a gain of about 1.1 per cent and in a year it could rise to Rs 82 - a gain of 1.7 per cent. It means the RBI dollar reserves would lose about 2 per cent value in a year. So, the RBI has decided to buy more gold than dollars. Its investment would be less at even Rs 73,000 for 10 gm and gains over 20 per cent. That's an intelligent economy.

The RBI has increased gold purchases to diversify reserves, with

gold value contributing to a \$3 billion rise in forex reserves to \$648.5 billion. RBI acquiring more gold in early 2024, aiming for diversification and inflation hedging.

The World Gold Council (WGC) says that RBI gold purchases touched 19 tonnes during January-March. This dwarfs the 16 tonnes of gold it bought in the whole of 2023.

In terms of countries with the highest gold reserves, the USA leads with 8,133 tonnes, followed by Germany, Italy, France and the Russian Federation with 3,366.49, 2,451.84, 2,436.01 and 2,271.16 tonnes of gold, respectively, according to WGC.

The surge in central banks' gold acquisitions stemmed from the aftermath of the US imposition of sanctions on Russia. These sanctions, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, included freezing Russian reserve dollars and imposing restrictions on crucial commodity trades such as crude oil. The global repercussions of these measures were profound, exposing vulnerabilities within Western financial institutions.

The option of investments in the stocks has become riskier. In February, China divested an additional \$22.7 billion in U.S. Treasury securities, as per the latest Federal Reserve data, reducing its total holdings to \$775 billion. Despite this decrease, China retains its position as the second-largest foreign holder of U.S. debt. China is reducing its dependence on the dollar, as per US Federal Reserve data.

According to ICICIdirect study,

The RBI wants to diversify its foreign exchange reserves and reduce dependence on the US dollar. Gold offers stability and isn't directly tied to the performance of any one currency. It can be especially valuable during times of economic uncertainty or fluctuations in the dollar's value.

Gold is considered as a hedge against inflation. When the value of currencies weakens due to inflation, gold tends to hold its value or even increase. It protects the purchasing power of India's foreign reserves.

The diversification of the portfolio to gold reserve, RBI says, can inspire confidence in the Indian economy from foreign investors. It signals a strong financial position and stability, potentially attracting more foreign investment.

While less common today, gold can still be used for international transactions. Holding a gold reserve allows India to settle debts with other countries if needed, or if those countries aren't willing to accept rupee.

The next few years can be times of turmoil and gold can be a stabilising factor in the international economy. It is particularly so as the IT sector, industry, markets are in a destabilised condition and would take time to calm. At such volatile times gold is likely to be more in demand than paper currencies. The RBI has resorted to the right move and lead the India economy, which has been striving to become one of the major world economies.

(The author is a senior journalist; views are personal)



THE WORLD GOLD COUNCIL SAYS THAT RBI GOLD PURCHASES TOUCHED 19 METRIC TONNES DURING JANUARY-MARCH. THIS DWARFS THE 16 TONNES OF GOLD IT BOUGHT IN THE WHOLE OF 2023

Reflections of an oncologist navigating imperfections in cancer care

Doctors aren't infallible gods but compassionate humans dedicated to easing human suffering, even in the face of formidable medical challenges

As an Oncologist, my days are filled with the most dreaded and life-threatening cancers head-on, armed with an arsenal of anti-cancer treatments that range from mild to equally dreadful. But amidst the battle against this relentless disease, I've come to understand that medical science is far from perfect.

Every time I sit down with a patient and their family to discuss treatment options, I embark on a delicate balancing act. Yes, I outline the potential benefits of the treatment, but I also dedicate ample time to explaining its imperfections and the associated risks - risks that can sometimes be massive, impacting not only the



PRASHANT MEHTA

patient's life but also their quality of life.

These discussions are rarely brief; on average, I find myself engaging with 2 to 8 family members, ensuring that everyone understands the complexities involved. And in these conversations, I make it a point to acknowledge that success is not guaranteed. I've had my fair share of failures and I recognise that my clinical judg-

ments aren't infallible. In the realm of oncology, the weight of responsibility is immense. The human toll of the disease, coupled with the emotional turmoil experienced by families, weighs heavily on me every single day. There are moments when the sheer gravity of it all threatens to overwhelm me, but I gather my strength, reminding myself of the dignity, composure and compassion required to navigate through these turbulent waters.

Recently, I stumbled upon an opinion piece penned by Mr. CY Gopinath, recounting the journey of a patient grappling with suspected pancreatic cancer. The patient felt as though his oncologist was pushing a

cancer diagnosis onto him. Such situations are not uncommon, especially when dealing with cancers that are notoriously difficult to biopsy. Misdiagnoses and the fear of missing a fatal diagnosis loom large in the minds of oncologists.

The widening trust gap between patients and healthcare providers is a cause for concern. Patients and their families may perceive our actions and recommendations in various ways, sometimes attributing them to ulterior motives. But the reality is often far more nuanced than it appears. Having worked extensively in both private and Government healthcare settings, I've witnessed my fair share of diagnostic and ther-



apeutic errors. These errors stem from the inherent imperfections of medicine and the challenges of navigating a complex healthcare landscape. In the modern era, doctors are acutely aware of the trust

deficit that exists between us and our patients. The notion of a 'God complex' is a myth; instead, we recognise our limitations and strive to bridge the gap through open communication and transparency.

While drugs and surgeries aren't panaceas, alternative treatments aren't always the answer either. It's imperative to base our decisions on evidence-backed practices rather than succumbing to anecdotal allure.

In the realm of healthcare, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Each patient's journey is unique, shaped by their individual preferences and circumstances. As doctors, we must personalise our approach, empowering patients to be active participants in their healing process.

It's crucial to foster an environment where patients feel empowered to question, learn and seek second opinions. After all, informed decision-making is the cor-

nerstone of effective healthcare delivery. In conclusion, amidst the cacophony of controversy and misinformation, the voice of expertise must prevail. Medicine is a science guided by evidence, not conjecture. Despite the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead, I remain steadfast in my commitment to serve, echoing the words of my mentor: "Someone has to do this work and you've been chosen. Do it well."

(The writer is a Senior Consultant and Program Director (Lymphoid Neoplasms and Cellular therapy) Department of Medical Oncology Amrita Institute of Medical sciences, Faridabad. Views are personal.)

Sput in post-poll violence in AP raises eyebrows

ANDHRA Pradesh has become the only state in the country to witness worst kind of post poll violence in the country. So far four phases of polls are over across the country and the remaining phases are going to take place soon. No where have there been such kind of violent incidents. There is a growing feeling among the people that the state is turning into another old Bihar where gun and bomb culture was rampant. In fact, it is even proving to be litmus test for the Election Commission of India which had successfully conducted four phases of elections across the country in a peaceful manner.

Why is it that Andhra Pradesh is witnessing uncontrollable violence in Palnadu, Anantapur, Chittoor

districts? Why is it that the state police has not been able to control it? How come it started towards the end of polling time on May 13? Since there were no assembly elections in any other state, adequate central forces were also sent to Andhra Pradesh. The Election Commission of India had changed many police officials including the DGP on the eve of the elections. But still the violence has been unabated for three days. Then why did this happen? Why three days later, police started raiding houses and seized bombs? What happened to the intelligence? Was there any political motive behind all this? These are the issues the people would like to know.

What is surprising is that this

situation has been reportedly dismissed by the top officials including the Chief Secretary and the DGP that it was old and personal rivalry that resulted in such violent attacks. Well, I am reminded of three monkeys of Mahatma Gandhi. One monkey closes its eyes, another closes its ears and the third one closes its mouth. There are clear visuals to show that the violence was not personal enmity but politically motivated and clashes between political parties, namely, the YSRCP and the TDP. There are visuals where the groups were seen with the party flags setting fire to tyres and beating rivals with iron rods, hammers, knives and sickles etc. There are reports that some police officials left

their place of posting and went to Tadipatri.

No sane person can believe that there were so many personal rivalries that attacks took place simultaneously in Tadipatri, Macherala, Tirupati, Anantapur and other places where party offices were attacked and damaged and cars and two wheelers were set on fire.

This raises several questions as to why the administration was so slack. Of course, these questions were reportedly raised by the Election Commission of India when the full commission sought the explanation of the Chief Secretary and the DGP; certainly they would not have accepted that it was their failure.

But then in administration ac-

countability is must and no one can just brush aside such incidents saying it could be group or family rivalries. In fact, anticipating such incidents, the opposition had been demanding that the CS also be changed along with the DGP but somehow, the ECI felt that change in DGP would be enough but after the latest developments and hearing their arguments, the ECI has started cracking its whip.

A good development because law and order is must for any state if its brand image has to remain intact. Elections may come and go, parties may win and lose but brand image should not be allowed to get damaged. Let's hope peace will be restored now and officials will understand their responsibility.

LETTERS

Jagan's win will trigger migration to TS

ALL parties after election in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are guaranteeing their win with maximum number of seats. Particularly, in AP the fight is between YSRCP and BJP-NDA alliance. It can also be said that it is exactly between Jagan Mohan Reddy and Chandrababu Naidu. People are desirous of a change of guard. But some political astrologers say Jagan may retain power. In that case, most of Andhraites will further migrate to Telangana districts, mainly to Hyderabad seeking avenues for employment. Right now more than one-third population in Telangana hails from AP. More than 80 per cent recorded voting in AP will play a vital role in deciding the fate of any party. Buying of votes by parties concerned is another piece of devaluing and demolition of our big democracy.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

Ease burden on schoolchildren

TO address students' health problems caused due to more weight of their school bags, the school education department reduced thickness of papers in the text books recently. Heavy school bags can have negative effects on children's health. Carrying a heavy bag can lead to pain and discomfort in the neck, shoulders, and back, as well as strain on the spine and posture problems. Additionally, it can cause muscle imbalances, headaches, and fatigue. So, the reduction in paper thickness would significantly reduce students' bags but not affect the content meant for the vested interest at all.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Modi should shun religious politics

IN a rare moment and mood, Prime Minister Narendra Modi candidly stated that if he does Hindu-Muslim (divide) politics he won't be fit for politics. It is hard to believe his clarification that he never meant Muslims by his reference to 'infiltrators' and 'those with more children'. Ideally, he should graciously admit his 'mistake' and retract his words. He should openly state that he will no more use anti-Muslim terminology and tropes. It was interesting to hear from him that he grew up in a multi-religious milieu. He reminisced about Eid and Muharram. We hope and expect that he keeps his present vow not to play the 'Hindu-Muslim' card.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

Congress making it easy for Modi

SOME serious mistakes by the Congress alliance during the 2024 election period are very glaring. Talking of X-ray machines and wealth redistribution is a major mistake. Talking of inheritance tax is outdated and out modelled. Talking of Pakistan and the atom bomb and talking of Pulwama can be fodder for our old enemy. The talk of not allowing CAA is only on paper. Talking of religion-based reservation is just a stunt. Talking of eradicating Sanatana Dharma is only a daydream. Talking of reinstating Article 370 is not fun. Narendra Modi is milking these in his Hindi heartland speeches.

Dorai Ramani Suresh, Ghaziabad

EC fails miserably in Andhra Pradesh

IT appears that the Election Commission both failed miserably in conducting Lok Sabha and Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh in a smooth way. Changing of 21 officers just a week in advance of the elections created the problem because these officers do not know anything about the AP situation. They did not behave in an impartial way. Both the Chief Election Commissioner & EC are responsible for the situation in AP. There was no law and order problem from 2019 till the day of election. At least now they should open their eyes and ensure that counting takes place in a fair way and prevent any untoward incidents during the counting process.

Sambasiva Rao Choda, Hyderabad

ANDHRA Pradesh has recorded highest voter turnout i.e., 81 per cent in ongoing General elections. It's good for democracy to have a majority of voters voice their choice. The active participation of people especially women and youth showing interest in the key democratic exercise, bearing the brunt of long queues and scorching heat, is itself a good sign for country. The only cause of concern is post poll violence. The EC and authorities concerned could have dealt it with sternly. It's also a moment to cherish to learn that Srinagar too witnessed higher polling percentage than ever before.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

THIS time AP registered 81.86% polling that included both postal ballot and home voting (1.2%). On the whole 26 lakh more voters exercised their franchise than 2019 elections. The fate of contestants will be out on June 4. Meanwhile, each party is claiming better chances of winning. In fact, this type of huge turnout is restricted only to local body elections. But registering high turnout is very rare in general elections. However it is a good omen for the democracy.

Pratap Reddy Y, Tiruvuru, NTR dt, AP

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AI impact on Indian elections

DR R RAVI KUMAR

IN the heart of the world's largest democracy, India, lies a mammoth political ecosystem pulsating with energy and anticipation during election seasons. With an estimated population of 1.44 billion, approximately 968 million eligible voters, and a Lok Sabha comprising 545 seats, the stakes could not be higher. As per the latest figures from the Election Commission of India, the political landscape boasts 8 national parties, 57 state parties, and a staggering 2,764 unrecognized parties. As the nation heads into the final phase of polls, the scope for young professionals in political communication is unprecedented, necessitating a shift towards specialised skill sets and emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) this kind of specialised skill sets courses should be clubbed in all academic disciplines, not limited to media studies. Government agencies should take active role in introducing new courses and programs for younger generations.

Relevance of AI in Indian polls

With the monumental task of reaching nearly a billion voters, AI offers novel solutions, enabling the automatic generation of video messages tailored to India's linguistic diversity. These messages can be seamlessly shared via phone messages and AI-powered chatbots, amplifying the voices of political leaders and garnering support in real-time. Elections, once confined to traditional strategies, have become a testing ground for the AI boom, with generative AI transcending language barriers in a linguistically diverse country like India. The one-time investment in AI technology offers an enormous reach, penetrating every nook and corner of the country with unpre-

cedented efficiency.

The integration of AI into election campaigns marks a paradigm shift in political strategy. AI-powered tools enable parties to analyse vast amounts of data, predict voter behaviour, and tailor messages to specific demographics, thereby enhancing campaign efficacy and outreach.

AI-generated version of politicians shared on WhatsApp: The emergence of AI-generated versions of politicians disseminated via platforms like WhatsApp underscores the pervasive influence of AI in political communication. These virtual avatars engage with voters, disseminate party messages, and personalize interactions, amplifying campaign reach and engagement.

Political parties' widespread use of AI: In recent election campaigns, almost all political parties have leveraged AI to gain a competitive edge. From data analytics to targeted advertising, AI technologies are employed across the spectrum of campaign activities, reshaping the electoral landscape and redefining conventional campaign strategies.

Reaching a country with nearly a billion voters: With a staggering electorate of nearly a billion voters, the challenge of reaching every corner of the country necessitates innovative solutions. AI facilitates micro-targeting, enabling parties to tailor messages and engage with voters at scale, transcending geographical barriers and maximizing campaign impact.

Automatic generation of video messages: AI-driven technologies enable the automatic generation of video messages, revolutionizing campaign communication. These personalized videos resonate with voters, convey key messages, and evoke emotional responses, enhancing voter engagement and mobilization.

Addressing linguistic di-

Exploring Career Opportunities Beyond Voting



iversity: India's linguistic diversity poses a unique challenge in election campaigns. AI-powered chatbots and language processing algorithms facilitate seamless communication in multiple languages, enabling parties to engage with voters in their native tongue and bridge linguistic barriers.

Sharing via phone messages and A.I.-powered chatbots: AI-powered chatbots facilitate real-time communication with voters via phone messages and social media platforms. These chatbots provide instant responses, disseminate information, and solicit feedback, fostering interactive engagement and bolstering campaign outreach.

Engaging political leaders and seeking their support: AI technologies enable parties to analyse social media data to identify influencers and opinion leaders. By engaging with political leaders and seeking their support, parties can leverage their influence to sway public opinion and mobilize support, amplifying the impact of their campaigns.

Elections as a testing ground for the A.I. boom: The electoral arena serves as a testing ground for the burgeoning AI boom. Innovations in AI-driven campaign strategies, from predictive modelling to sentiment analysis, are refined and perfected in the crucible of electoral politics, driving the evolution of AI technologies and their applications.

Generative AI removing language barriers: Generative AI technologies, such as

Shaping future careers

Communication skills are paramount in conveying the impact of AI solutions to diverse stakeholders, while an understanding of voter behaviour is instrumental in crafting effective campaign strategies. Predictive modelling, interdisciplinary collaboration, and real-time data processing are indispensable tools for staying ahead in this competitive arena. Above all, a commitment to continuous learning is essential, given the rapid evolution of AI technologies and their applications in election campaigns.

Varsity offerings, student learning

Understanding Political Dynamics: Universities should offer courses that provide students with a deep understanding of political dynam-

ics, including electoral systems, political ideologies, and campaign strategies. Students should learn to analyse political trends, anticipate shifts in public opinion, and navigate the complexities of the political landscape.

Data Analysis Skills: Courses in data analysis equip students with the skills to analyse large datasets, extract meaningful insights, and make data-driven decisions. Students should learn statistical techniques, data visualization tools, and machine learning algorithms relevant to political analysis and campaign strategy.

Programming Proficiency: Programming courses should focus on languages commonly used in AI development, such as Python and R. Students should learn to write code, develop AI algorithms, and deploy AI-powered applications for political communication and voter engagement.

Ethical Considerations: Students should learn to evaluate the ethical dimensions of AI technologies and develop responsible AI solutions that uphold democratic principles and values.

Communication Skills: Students should learn to craft persuasive messages, engage with diverse audiences, and effectively communicate political ideas and policies.

Understanding Voter Behaviour: Courses in psychology and sociology provide students with insights into voter behaviour, attitudes, and preferences. Students should learn to conduct voter surveys, analyse voter demographics, and interpret electoral data to inform campaign strategies.

Predictive Modelling: Courses in predictive modelling teach students how to develop predictive models using statistical techniques and machine learning algorithms. Students should learn to forecast election outcomes, identify key drivers of voter behaviour, and optimize cam-

aign resources for maximum impact.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Interdisciplinary courses promote collaboration across disciplines, fostering creativity and innovation in AI-driven campaign strategies. Students should learn to work effectively in interdisciplinary teams, integrate diverse perspectives, and leverage complementary skills to solve complex problems.

Real-time Data Processing: Courses in real-time data processing focus on technologies and techniques for handling streaming data in real-time. Students should learn to develop AI-powered applications that analyse and respond to real-time data streams, enabling dynamic and adaptive campaign strategies.

Continuous Learning: Lifelong learning is essential in a rapidly evolving field like AI in election campaigns. Universities should offer opportunities for continuous learning through workshops, seminars, and online courses. Students should cultivate a mindset of curiosity and adaptability, staying abreast of the latest developments and innovations in AI technologies and their applications in politics.

Conclusion

The convergence of AI and election campaigns presents a wealth of opportunities for young professionals in India. By embracing specialized skill sets and leveraging emerging technologies, they can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Indian democracy. As universities remould their curricula to meet the demands of this evolving landscape, the onus is on students to seize the moment and embark on a journey towards pioneering change in the realm of AI-driven election campaigns.

(Writer is Professor & Head of Department, School of Media Studies, Presidency University, Bangalore)

The rising burden of dengue in India

RISING temperatures, unprecedented floods, and challenges in public health infrastructure are all contributing to the rising burden of dengue in India, said experts on Wednesday, ahead of National Dengue Day. National Dengue Day is observed every year on May 16.

The theme this year is 'Dengue Prevention: Our Responsibility for a Safer Tomorrow'. Dengue is a vector-borne disease transmitted through the bite of an infected mosquito and is endemic to more than 100 countries.

"Dengue fever's widespread presence in India can be attributed primarily to the region's climate, which creates an ideal environment for Aedes mosquitoes, the primary vector for dengue virus transmission. These mosquitoes thrive in warm, humid conditions prevalent across many parts of India, particularly during the monsoon season," said Dr Rohit Kumar Garg, Consultant, Depart-

ment of Infectious Diseases, Amrita Hospital, Faridabad.

Urbanisation and the density of the human population also facilitate the rapid spread of the virus. "The rising burden of dengue in India reflects these conditions, alongside challenges in public health infrastructure to control the spread and manage outbreaks effectively," Dr Rohit said.

According to the experts, the transmission of dengue is closely associated with three key factors: Rainfall, humidity, and temperature which dictate the geographies in which it spreads and the transmission rate. "Unpredictable rains, coupled with rampant construction and inadequate drainage systems, create stagnant water pockets that are ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes," Dr. Divya Gopal, Internal Medicine, Sir HN Reliance Hospital and Research Centre, told IANS.

"Rising temperatures and unprecedented flooding have



also encouraged the spread of mosquitoes well beyond their traditional breeding grounds, bringing dengue fever to areas never before threatened by these debilitating illnesses," she added. Despite the challenges, progress has been made, particularly in the development and implementation of strategies for vector control in India, which can be seen in the declining cases and death rates.

As per the data from the Health Ministry's National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NVBDCP), dengue claimed 91 lives and affected 94,198 people in the country in India in 2023 -- a marked decline from 1,93,245 cases and 346 deaths in 2021. However, in 2022, the cases declined (23,3251) but deaths rose (303).

Meanwhile, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has prequalified two dengue vaccines -- Japanese drug maker Takeda's live-attenuated TAK-003 and Sanofi Pasteur's CYD-TDV.

"These vaccines offer hope for reducing the incidence of dengue, although their effectiveness depends on broader strategies including vector control, public awareness, and robust surveillance systems to monitor and respond to outbreaks efficiently," Dr

Rohit told IANS.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Wednesday announced that it has prequalified Japanese drug maker Takeda's dengue vaccine. The live-attenuated TAK-003 vaccine is the second dengue jab to be pre-qualified by the WHO. It contains weakened versions of the four serotypes of the virus that cause dengue, the WHO said. Previously, the WHO prequalified the CYD-TDV vaccine for dengue developed by Sanofi Pasteur. The UN health body recommended the use of TAK-003 in children aged 6-16 years in areas with high dengue burden and transmission intensity. The vaccine should be administered in a 2-dose schedule with a 3-month interval between doses, it noted.

"The prequalification of TAK-003 is an important step in the expansion of global access to dengue vaccines, as it is now eligible for

procurement by UN agencies including UNICEF and PAHO," said Dr Rogerio Gaspar, WHO Director for Regulation and Prequalification, in a statement. He called for more vaccine developers to come forward for assessment to "ensure vaccines reach all communities who need it".

What the country urgently needs

"Diseases both infective like tuberculosis, malaria, hepatitis etc are in abundance and non-infective like diabetes with its complications, heart diseases, lung diseases like Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and bronchial asthma are on another spectrum," added Ajay Agarwal, Director-Internal Medicine, Fortis Hospital, Noida. Common risk factors contributing to many of these include poor diet, physical inactivity, smoking, alcohol consumption, environmental pollution and economic disparities.

Opinion

FRIDAY, MAY 17, 2024



INDIA'S 5G ROLLOUT

Union electronics & IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

“The world's fastest rollout of 5G has happened in India. And the whole world is surprised by this. Now in the world, everyone says that if it happens in India, it will be of a different scale”

Beyond June 4

Concerns over impact of election results seem overblown as the long-term prospects for Indian stocks look good

THE VOLATILITY IN the stock markets has prompted top ministers of the ruling government to try and calm investors by reassuring them that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will return with a strong majority. This was in response to apprehensions in some circles that the BJP may win the ongoing general elections by only a slim margin because of the relatively subdued voter turnouts. That may have prompted some investors to take a little risk off the table in the belief that a not-so-comfortable majority might slow down the speed of reforms, which in turn could impact the economy's growth trajectory. Attempting to dispel their fears, Union home minister Amit Shah advised investors to “buy before June 4” when the results will be declared, saying stock prices would shoot up after a dominant victory for the BJP. External affairs minister S Jaishankar expressed confidence the markets would stabilise after the election results are announced. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has promised more efficiency, stability, and predictability in the market after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns for a third term, assuring investors of a “soft-touch” regulatory framework along with more governance and a less government.

Whether foreign portfolio investors (FPI), who have offloaded stocks worth some \$4 billion since April and \$3.2 billion in May alone, do a U-turn remains to be seen. They also hold bearish positions in the derivatives markets. But it's not just the uncertainty over the outcome of the elections that is seeing FPI fund flow out. The risk-reward ratio is less favourable now in India than in other markets where the returns look more promising. Many have taken their money to China; the MSCI China index has gone up 20% in the last three months and 12% in the last one month. The Hong Kong and Taiwan markets have also done well. Indeed, while India's weight in the MSCI EM Index may have increased steadily, active global emerging market funds have remained underweight.

It is a fact that valuations are rich at a time when corporate earnings for the fourth quarter of FY24 have been a bit of a mixed bag. Revenues for the universe of companies (excluding banks and financials), which have announced numbers for the March quarter, have grown only at about 7-8%. The growth in the bottom line has been muted. As such the upgrades to earnings have been few with many more downgrades. The Nifty 50 is now trading at around 21 times one-year forward earnings, and a fairly big premium to the MSCI EM, leaving only a small cushion for any disappointments.

While the macro-environment looks good going by headline numbers, there are some pressure points. For one, it is now clear interest rates are going to remain higher for longer. Again, while there is optimism on rural recovery, spending is understood to have contracted. In fact private consumption expenditure data reveals slow growth in the past several quarters. Again, the global slowdown could hurt the country's exports. But there are enough businesses that are faring well and the outlook for many companies is promising. Domestic savings are being channelled into equities as is evident from the huge collections in SIP (systematic investment plans), which now average some ₹16,000 crore a month. Should the BJP not fare as well as expected, the markets might pare some of its gains. But the long-term prospects for Indian stocks look good.

Why Mercedes' \$100,000 electric jellybean flopped

WHEN MERCEDES-BENZ GROUP AG unveiled a luxury electric sedan called the EQS in 2021, managers boasted about the radical aerodynamic design, billing it as the German automaker's most significant launch in decades. Three years later, the electric version of the flagship S-Class risks becoming one of the biggest flops in Mercedes' storied history, and its shortcomings have contributed to the company's decision to ditch a goal of selling only electric vehicles by 2030.

The German automaker's stumble shows the dangers premium carmakers face as they try to take on Tesla Inc. and persuade their conservative clientele to get a plug. It also underscores the need to better protect EV resale values.

Capacious S-Class limousines have chauffeured political and business leaders for decades, and are especially popular with Chinese elites. However, Mercedes opted for a less boxy design for the EQS, which was built on technical underpinnings developed specifically for EVs. Not only would the curved silhouette — which the company immodestly compared to a bullet train and critics dubbed a jellybean — reduce air resistance and thus boost efficiency and driving range, the EQS would also be clearly distinguishable from vehicles that have a combustion engine. Mercedes even sacrificed the traditional standing three-point star on the hood, instead integrating the badge into a sleek black radiator panel.

Sales of the luxury electric sedan declined 40% to just 14,100 units last year, according to Mercedes' annual report. Price cuts in China and heavily discounted US lease deals failed to revive demand while undermining the company's strategy of prioritising high values over sales volumes. Combustion engine S-Class deliveries were more than six times higher.

Chief executive officer Ola Källenius has put on a brave face, telling investors in February that customers were very happy with their purchase. But the company's recent announcement of extensive upgrades to the vehicle speaks volumes. Along with a larger battery, these “status-conscious” improvements include a more traditional radiator grille featuring chrome-plated slats, a standing star on the hood, plus new seating options so rear passengers feel less impinged. Costs associated with these updates contributed to a steep decline in the Mercedes' car unit's profitability in the first quarter, when its fully electric car sales declined 8% compared with the prior year.

The tweaks may help a bit, but there's little the company can do about the sedan's much-criticised shape — while not so to my taste, a bulbous seven-seat EQS SUV is proving more popular. And the EQS still doesn't come with the 800-volt fast-charging system available on EVs at lower price points.

Sensibly, Mercedes chose not to market the electric G-Class as the “EQG” when it was unveiled last month, and its classic off-road silhouette remains instantly recognisable. Jaguar Land Rover Automotive Plc appears to be taking a similarly conservative approach with the forthcoming electric Range Rover which will include only “subtle” hints that it comes with a plug. Meanwhile, Ferrari NV has emphasised that its first EV, expected next year, will sound like a true Ferrari.

Automakers also need to remain as flexible as possible to adapt to fluctuating demand for EVs. BMW AG's electric vehicles not only look much like its gasoline ones, they're built on the same platform. So far, its cautious approach is paying off, with its EV sales outstripping those of Mercedes.

However, premium carmakers won't persuade more consumers to go electric unless they also fix their horrible residual values. The cost of purchasing a one-year-old EQS is almost 48% lower than the average new price, according to a study by US auto search portal iSeeCars. That's the worst of any vehicle it analysed.

Consumer worries about technological obsolescence, high repair and insurance costs and establishing the condition of the battery are part of the problem. Another issue is pushing polarising, expensive EVs to early adopters. Mercedes is now feeling the impact with the full force of a bullet-train.

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

TRACKING MOVEMENT ON ROADS CAN GIVE A GOOD VIEW OF DEMAND AND SUPPLY PATTERNS

On the toll plaza trail

AKHILESH TILOTIA AKSHATA KALLOOR

The authors are with National Investment and Infrastructure Fund Ltd. Views are personal



before the festival season. When calculating y-o-y growth, one needs to consider the lunar calendar for festival seasons. Since the road traffic typically precedes expected demand, tracking movement on Indian roads can give market participants a good view of underlying demand and supply patterns.

Linking freight to trade

While analysing data of June 2023 in our heat maps, we had noted that toll plaza points on the map to and from ports started to turn yellow (lower yoy growth) and, in some cases, red (reflecting a drop over last year), indicating an overall slowdown in traffic movements. Over the next few months, we could see the changes in India's goods exim trade broadly reflecting this slowdown. Again, over the next few months since June, as India's exports and imports picked up, the toll plazas

turned green. Data from toll plazas, especially those connecting to ports, can be used to act as an indicator for trade. Similarly, we found that the overall volume growth on roads tracks reasonably closely (with a one-month lag) with growth in e-way bills generated on the goods and services tax network.

Understanding state growth

We pulling together data on all toll plazas in respective states (see graphic). A mosaic of state-wise growth in tolls overtime can depict a one-shot comprehensive picture of growth over time and space.

Top 10 plazas

Mapping the top 10 toll plazas highlights the key revenue and traffic points: no surprise that the highest value tolls are on the roads connecting the northern hinterland to the western and eastern ports;

and the highest volume ones are around cities. A typical top 10 toll plaza sees a daily toll collection of around ~1 crore.

Some caveats

FASTag is now used not just for paying tolls but also for parking charges and, in some cases, fuel. Over time, as usage of FASTag widened, we noted divergence between total value of swipes at plazas and FASTag spends. Many high-frequency indicator charts still make use of the overall FASTag number to get a sense of the road activity — they may want to consider making this adjustment.

As with any new data sets and analyses, they will evolve and refine. While we now get a good grasp on many trends, polishing of analyses will be required. There are some data gaps across time and plazas. Some data sets have been discontinued, making some comparisons trickier.

Digital data disseminated widely and consistently can create a vocabulary to understand and analyse these changes. We are limited by only our imagination of how to think about analyses, visualisations, and implications. Over time, as varied digital public metadata is collected and disseminated, analyses will get refined and serve as a good indicator of economic activity.

TOLL HEAT MAP: A SNAPSHOT OF INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH

Growth in toll traffic (volume) across top 10 states, Mar 2023 to Mar 2024

Toll traffic	Mar '23	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan '24	Feb	Mar
Uttar Pradesh	6.0	5.7	8.7	7.8			8.7	8.5	8.1	9.0	0.7	3.9	8.1
Rajasthan	1.1	4.7	7.5	6.4			9.3	5.4	1.0	4.8	1.9	1.7	5.1
Maharashtra	4.8	6.7	10.8	10.3			8.2	(1.2)	7.3	6.7	5.6	3.3	4.1
Tamil Nadu	2.2	8.7	14.2	1.7			7.2	5.9	10.0	(0.7)	5.2	4.3	4.9
Karnataka	8.7	11.3	12.8	10.3			15.9	7.1	11.6	10.8	7.2	8.4	10.0
Andhra Pradesh	1.0	(0.2)	7.6	2.5			7.2	11.5	6.0	3.6	6.8	5.7	8.6
Madhya Pradesh	5.0	3.2	10.7	10.0			8.6	12.8	0.8	6.7	2.4	2.9	7.9
Gujarat	1.3	9.0	9.0	(2.4)			15.4	7.5	13.5	11.0	6.3	9.0	11.8
West Bengal	(2.1)	(2.0)	3.4	(1.1)			(0.1)	4.0	(0.8)	3.0	4.2	3.0	4.7
Telangana	3.7	0.8	8.0	3.0			9.9	10.1	6.4	6.6	6.3	9.0	8.3
India	6.5	6.0	9.9	7.5			9.4	7.3	7.1	7.0	4.9	2.9	6.1

Note: For more details on the calculations, please see the presentation on NIIF website

Source: Thurro, IHMCL, NIIF Research

Carbon credits: A flawed tool



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Policy researcher and corporate advisor
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JUST AS A stable currency underpins economic transactions, a credible mechanism for valuing and trading carbon emissions is needed for propelling substantive progress towards net zero. Each time a new corporate scandal involving carbon credits emerges, such as the recent revelation of Shell's involvement in fake carbon credits reported by the *Financial Times*, the world's trust in the mechanism of carbon credits diminishes further. The crux of the challenge lies in the apparent alignment between governments and industry lobbies, which prioritise their interests.

Voluntary carbon markets, where buyers voluntarily purchase and trade offsets derived from emissions reduction or removal projects, have ignited a contentious debate. Advocates champion these markets as indispensable channels for bolstering climate finance and facilitating companies in achieving net-zero ambitions. Conversely, detractors assail voluntary schemes as elaborate greenwashing mechanisms, yielding scant impact on emissions reduction endeavours.

Carbon offsets epitomise the fusion of lofty ideals with the harsh realities of implementation. While theoretically compelling, they present inherent flaws. They engender a precarious equilibrium, contending with the stark verities of human nature, market dynamics, and regulatory maze and measurement inertia. Carbon credits are generated through activities aimed at storing, reducing, or preventing greenhouse gas emissions. However, rely-

ing solely on offsets to achieve emission reduction targets is inherently flawed and poses a significant risk of exacerbating the climate crisis. Analogous to a depreciated currency, carbon offsets grapple with a crisis of trust precipitated by inconsistencies in standards, verification processes, and project quality. This undermines the integrity of the carbon offset market, impeding its capacity to effectuate substantial emissions reductions.

Carbon credits, though touted as a mechanism to combat climate change by incentivising emission reductions among companies, perpetuate the misconception that emissions can merely be offset and temporarily, rather than fundamentally, reduced. This engenders a perilous complacency among corporations, enabling them to perpetuate pollution under the veneer of purchasing credits to “neutralise” their emissions.

Genuine progress in combatting climate change necessitates concerted efforts to curtail emissions at their source. Moreover, the concept of carbon credits presents a significant ethical dilemma. By commodifying the privilege to pollute, carbon credits establish a system where affluent entities can continue emitting greenhouse gases without consequence, while marginalised communities bear the environmental burdens and fallout of cli-

mate-related catastrophes.

Furthermore, the carbon credit market is rampant with loopholes and inconsistencies. The absence of standardised regulations and oversight results in disparities in the quality and reliability of carbon credits. In some instances, projects purportedly reducing emissions fail to deliver on their promises, engendering a false sense of achievement and squandering valuable resources.

The phenomenon of carbon-washing increases these challenges, as entities procure ineligible or subpar carbon credits to offset their emissions. This practice undermines the integrity of carbon markets and the efficacy of climate change mitigation endeavours. Besides, carbon-washing threatens to divert investments away from genuine emission reduction projects, impeding progress in achieving net-zero emissions and exacerbating the climate crisis.

The undue influence of wealthy global corporations within the framework of carbon credits is a glaring issue that undermines genuine action. These influential entities wield significant political power and often exploit regulatory loopholes to their advantage. Holding these corporations accountable and ensuring they bear the true cost of their pollution is essential. However, this task is complicated by the fact that many of these corporations are

Carbon credits perpetuate the misconception that emissions can merely be offset and temporarily, rather than fundamentally, reduced

headquartered in affluent nations, which themselves have failed to fulfill their commitments to fund climate initiatives.

While advocating for setting up a universally recognised framework for carbon pricing and offsetting is crucial, scepticism persists regarding its feasibility and effectiveness. Despite acknowledging the importance of governmental support, industrial strategies, and regulatory measures, the historical implementation of such frameworks has been inconsistent. The reluctance of some nations to commit to meaningful climate action adds to these concerns.

While a robust carbon pricing mechanism holds promise, practical challenges and a lack of concrete actions to address systemic issues cast doubt on its ability to deliver transformative change.

While carbon credits may be an approach to reducing overall emissions, they ultimately fall short of delivering substantive results. Carbon credits can be likened to outsourcing physical fitness by paying someone else to work out on your behalf. While it may seem convenient, this approach fails to address the root causes of the problem. Purchasing carbon offsets doesn't fundamentally reduce carbon footprints, but it creates a false sense of accomplishment while allowing the underlying issue of emissions to persist. In order to truly combat climate change, we must prioritise genuine emission reductions rather than relying on offsetting measures that merely shift responsibility elsewhere.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rethink election schedule

When the fifth phase of Lok Sabha elections is round the corner, there are serious concerns about the prevailing campaign scenario. Several reports and analysis have been published in the media on the low voter turnout. The internally displaced persons (IDP), because of the nature of jobs, are away from their constituencies in

large numbers. Too many phases and a prolonged election period are causing fatigue and voter apathy. Too much focus on mobilising minorities on the fear factor is also a big concern. In a digitised society, the Election Commission of India should consider a new election strategy that conducts the polling in a shorter duration, besides allowing voting from remote locations for IDPs.
—Vinod Johri, Delhi

Chabahar and India

India's recent decade-long agreement with Iran regarding the Chabahar Port signifies a pivotal step in the country's regional strategy. The port offers India a crucial foothold in the region, allowing it to diversify trade routes and bypass Pakistan to establish direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The integration of Chabahar Port into the International

North-South Transport Corridor further enhances India's connectivity with key partners. By assuming operational control of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, India not only showcases its growing maritime capabilities but also demonstrates its commitment to fostering regional stability and prosperity.
—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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और सभी न्यूज़ पेपर मैगजीन प्राप्त करने के लिए सर्वप्रथम इस टेलीग्राम ग्रुप को ज्वाइन करें नीचे दिए लकि पर क्लिक करके ज्वाइन टेलीग्राम

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DECCAN Chronicle

17 MAY 2024

Lower courts need to keep a better vigil on citizen's rights

The order of the Supreme Court holding the arrest and remand of founder editor of online portal *newslick.com* Prabir Purkayastha "invalid in the eyes of law" and directing his release from jail not only restores his fundamental rights as a citizen but also exposes a ploy of the government at the Centre that it has been successfully employing to intimidate critics and incarcerate enemies.

The court had, in a judgment in October, ruled that the investigating agency is bound to apprise a suspect upon his arrest of the grounds of his arrest as that is his only means to defend himself in a court of law. It insisted that its order in the Pankaj Bansal case, which underlined the right of a citizen guaranteed under Article 22(1) of the Constitution mandating that "no person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest nor shall he be denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice", held good in this case as well. It rejected the argument of the Delhi police which carried out his arrest that he was informed of the "reasons for arrest" and insisted that the "grounds of arrest" are specific to the case which alone can be of any help to the accused.

It is to the credit of the court that it rejected the police's argument that the order in the Pankaj Bansal case, which was delivered on October 3, does not cover Mr Purkayastha's arrest a day later. It is unbefitting on the part of the government and the investigating agencies to cling to technicalities, if they exist, to deny citizens their constitutional rights.

Unfortunately, the same has been the pattern of the Central investigating agencies for some time now. They have been observed to be routinely abusing various laws, including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), to arrest and incarcerate people who do not agree with the policies or functioning of the government. That's because these laws impose very stringent, practically impossible conditions, on the defendant when it comes to obtaining bail. At the same time, the agencies, themselves, hardly follow the rigours of the law while conducting arrests.

It is also regrettable that the magistrate and special courts which deal with cases filed by such agencies do not look at the facts to see if the safeguards the lawmakers have welded into the laws have been available to the accused citizens or not. It may be remembered that the Nagpur bench of the Bombay high court found twice that the NIA had failed to uphold the provisions of the UAPA when it prosecuted Prof. G.N. Saibaba in the Bhima Koregaon Naxal link case. Also notably, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's petition challenging his arrest is lying with the Supreme Court. In the instant case, it was the job of the additional sessions judge who remanded Mr Purkayastha in police custody to verify if his fundamental rights had been violated, instead of leaving it to the highest court of the land. The defendant was thus made to spend months behind bars. It is in the interest of the top courts, which have been burdened with cases piling up there, the citizen and the rule of law that the lower courts are alerted to keep a better vigil.

How necessary is CAA?

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act has just been operationalised with the granting of citizenship to 300 persons many of whom have faced religious persecution in their country of domicile and so sought out India as a haven.

To say such naturalised citizens of India are elated may be an understatement, but the implementation of the law — it has been on the statute for close to five years — during the elections to the Lok Sabha is bound to make it continuously contentious in a country of religious diversity.

The CAA grants citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Parsis who arrived in India from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on or before December 31, 2014, but not to, say, Sri Lankan Tamils even if they belong to any of those religions and certainly not to Rohingyas. It does not snatch citizenship from Indian residents of any religion, and it has nothing to do with the proposed National Register of Citizens, according to the ruling party's major leaders now. But the fear is the two may be used in conjunction at some point of time in the future and put in peril the many illegal Muslim refugees who may be in the country.

Considering the Union government has the right any way to grant citizenship to those who seek it even if they are illegal refugees, the need for a CAA was always more political than practical. It is so fraught with religious discrimination that India's 18 crore Muslims must feel alienated.

The legal challenges to the CAA lies in hundreds of fresh petitions besides the 200 or so lying before the Supreme Court since December 2019. A basic and significant challenge is that the CAA discriminates against Muslims based on religion and so violates the right to equality under Article 14 and, perhaps, Article 25 as well.

The opinions on the CAA, in itself a benevolent legislation that takes into account religious discrimination against non-Muslims in some neighbouring countries, are so divided on partisan lines that it is difficult to see it in isolation save as politically driven by one party with an agenda. The introduction of religion as a criterion for citizenship makes this a departure from the country's secular values. Does India need more layers of divisiveness?

Subhani



Chabahar deal: Unreal hopes amid twin wars



K.C. Singh

The Indian Ocean-facing Iranian port of Chabahar, the only Iranian port outside the Straits of Hormuz, is back in the news. A 10-year agreement between India and Iran to further develop it, worth \$370 million, was signed earlier this week, on May 13.

The basic concept for the joint development of Chabahar was first mooted during the 2003 state visit to India by then Iranian President Muhammad Khatami. There was then close strategic convergence between India and Iran. Both saw Pakistan's active political interference in Afghanistan as detrimental to their interests. Consequently, both backed the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who opposed Pakistan-backed Pashtun elements seizing control of much of the country. Thus, the joint development of Chabahar, located strategically on Iran's Indian Ocean coast, was a natural corollary to the Indo-Iranian partnership.

With India's preoccupation with the nuclear deal with the United States, while Iran was being sanctioned after its clandestine nuclear activities were discovered in 2003, Chabahar fell off the main agenda. In fact, Iran resented India, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, being mollycoddled, while Iran was singled out for harsh treatment for its clandestine nuclear programme. It ignored the distinction between a signatory, that is Iran, breaching the treaty's terms, compared to a conscientious objector like India, which rejected it as a discriminatory convention. Eventually in 2015, a bilateral agreement was signed to develop the port. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Iran visit in 2016,

a trilateral agreement was also signed between Afghanistan, Iran and India to establish an International Transport and Transit Corridor. Chabahar was seen as providing a safe route to Afghanistan and the Central Asian nations, bypassing the existing link via Pakistan's ports.

In 2018, the Indian company India Ports Global Limited set up a subsidiary to run Shahid Beheshti Port, one of the two terminals at Chabahar. The present agreement is part of the Iranian scheme for its four-phase development, lifting its annual cargo-handling capacity from the existing 2.5 million tonnes to 82 million tonnes. At present, Bandar Abbas, Iran's main port on the Gulf, handles 85 per cent of Iran's maritime trade. This has caused serious congestion and time delays.

In principle, this sounds logical and achievable. But nothing involving Iran is ever that simple or straightforward. Iran is ranged against Israel and the United States, and is seen as stoking the Gaza hostilities. Iran, for the first time ever, directly launched a massive missile and drone attack on Israel in retaliation for the Israeli bombing of Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus. Israel also symbolically responded by a calibrated attack on Iranian anti-missile sites near its nuclear facilities. With Israel's Rafah operation now underway, despite repeated American objections, the US obviously was unlikely to be pleased by any India-Iranian hand-holding.

Vedant Patel, the deputy spokesman of the US state department, warned that India "needs to be aware of potential risk of sanctions". The US has already imposed sanctions on 600 Iranian entities or individuals. So far, India has been able to

Interest in the North-South Corridor has now revived due to the regional impact of the Gaza conflict. But this ignores the Ukraine war and the Western sanctions against Russia.

obtain a US exemption regarding Indian activities in Chabahar, arguing that the port was critical to keep humanitarian assistance flowing to Afghanistan, especially when it came under Taliban control, after the US withdrawal in August 2021. Now, however, the port is being advertised as also a transit corridor running via the Caspian Sea to St. Petersburg. This underscores the Iran-Russia bonhomie and cooperation, both nations seen to be joining the Chinese attempt to reconfigure the global order.

The North-South Corridor via the Caspian is not a new idea. It was seriously in play when this writer was the Indian ambassador to Iran (2003-05). However, it faced a number of hurdles. One was the extremely high Iranian charges for transshipment of containers from the Gulf to the Caspian Sea. That covered unloading at Bandar Abbas port, transportation overland and reloading on ships at the Caspian. Next came the money demanded by the Russian mafia on the arrival of the cargo at Russia's Caspian ports. Finally, because of an imbalance of trade, the containers got stuck in Russia as there were not enough products to send back to Asia from the Russian end.

The China factor is also significant in any deal with Iran. The India-Iran deal is being justified as a strategic counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has invested heavily in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), terminating at Gwadar, which is barely 200 km from Chabahar. China is thus keen to keep a foot in the door at Chabahar, to remain informed about

its development and possible challenge to Chinese interests in Pakistan. China had earlier signed a 25-year cooperation agreement with Iran worth \$400 billion. It is unclear what if any of that China proposes to invest in Chabahar. In any case, China's first priority would be to safeguard its investment in Gwadar as the entrepôt for Central Asia. Chabahar having an identical purpose, in addition to feeding the North-South Corridor leading to Russia, creates for China conflicts of interest.

Interest in the North-South Corridor has now revived due to the regional impact of the Gaza conflict. The US-envisioned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), planned to run from India to Europe via the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Israel, is now defunct in the immediate future due to the Gaza hostilities. The Suez Canal transit route has the Houthi threat disrupting it. Thus, an alternative route via the Caspian and Russia seems plausible. But this ignores the Ukraine war and the Western sanctions against Russia. How can St Petersburg be a practicable European end of the corridor with the hostilities in Ukraine persisting?

Iran shall always be a difficult partner for fashioning a new security and trade paradigm in West Asia. It values strategic independence like India. As a Shia power it vies with Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Islamic world, with major influence over the Shia crescent of nations running from Iran to the Mediterranean. It is also seen as a prominent member of the Russia-China-led group of nations defying US hegemony.

Until the two wars in Gaza and Ukraine come to an end, India's Chabahar plans will see incremental growth rather than strategic leaps. Balancing interests in a conflict-laden world shall remain a challenge for Indian diplomacy.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambksingh.

LETTERS DEVELOPING CHABAHAH PORT

The development of Chabahar port in Iran, which could open access to the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and Europe, was one of the significant agreements signed during the visit of then-Iranian President Syed Mohammad Khatami to India in 2003. However, as animosity deepened between the US and Iran and India grew closer to the former since then, the development of the port slowed down. Under these circumstances, the announcement of a 10-year contract between the government's India Ports Global Limited and the Ports and Maritime Organization for the operation of the terminal at Chabahar has assumed much significance. While concern about the US sanctions on Iran affecting India's strategic bet with Chabahar cannot be overlooked, the fact remains that India has now positioned itself as a greater force to be reckoned with in the global arena and a confident emerging power who could negotiate a complex global strategic environment with alacrity.

M. Jeyaram Sholavandan

BAN LTTE PERMANENTLY

The ban on LTTE being extended for a further 5 years by Home Ministry is commendable. There is no doubt that the LTTE which has lost its fangs however continues to be a threat to India's sovereignty, territorial integrity and safety of its citizens. The LTTE and its supporters, especially Sri Lankan Tamils settled in countries like Canada, US, Germany and UK supporting it by funding them and trying to regroup the outfit and give a new and dangerous life is condemnable. The MHA should ban the LTTE permanently and take severe action against those supporting and funding them. The brutal assassination of our former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the unscrupulous LTTE cadres cannot be easily forgotten. Supporters of the outfit need to wake up and stop their blind support to a banned terrorist Organisation.

M.C.Vijay Shankar Chennai

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Mahir Ali

Storm in Malmö: Controversy was much more at Eurovision 2024

Seldom before has the annual festival of schmaltz and schlock known as the Eurovision Song Contest been subject to so much controversy as it was in the run-up to this year's edition in Sweden last weekend. Not surprisingly, it revolved around the global issue du jour: Israel's genocide in Gaza.

Russia was excluded after its invasion of Ukraine — the latter won the 2022 contest. It needs to be noted, though, that the complex voting rules, which have evolved since Eurovision's inception in 1956, allow room for manipulation, which is invariably guided by political concerns. As far back as 1968, Spain's fascist Franco regime reportedly lobbied for vote rigging to score a victory that relegated Cliff Richard's popular "Congratulations" to second place.

The Iberian Peninsula was Europe's last fascist stronghold, but Portugal has a somewhat different relationship with Eurovision: its 1974 entry, E Depois Do Aeus by Paulo de Carvalho, was deployed to serve as a signal for a coup by younger officers that presaged Portuguese democracy and the liberation of Lisbon's colonies — from Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau to East Timor.

Fifty years after Sweden's Abba became the first Eurovision victor to transform its win (Waterloo

into global acclaim, few other acts have scored the same level of global success, including the four Israeli performers since 1973, when members of the European Broadcasting Union were admitted, regardless of their geographical standing.

Controversy, however, has often reared its head. In 2019, Ukraine withdrew from Eurovision after its shortlisted acts refused to commit to not touring Russia. Ten years earlier, Georgia's entry, I Don't Wanna Put In, was rejected on the grounds that it could be construed as a derogatory reference to Russia's ruler.

Much of that fades into relative insignificance after Israel's initial entry this year, October Rain, was deemed problematic because of its references to last year's Hamas-led outrage (but none to the ensuing atrocities in Gaza). Israel was miffed, but it modified the lyrics and came up with Hurricane — not to be confused with Bob Dylan's anti-racist song of the same name.

The Israeli performer, Eden Golan, was surrounded by Shin Bet-sponsored armed guards throughout her stay in Malmö, and not allowed to mingle with fellow artists, who might have enlightened her with their views on Israel's military excesses. Ironically, Golan was until recently a pop star in Russia who

performed for its troops in Crimea. None of that seemed to matter once her family moved back to Israel and she shifted her allegiance to the equally deplorable Benjamin Netanyahu. According to the *Washington Post*, she faced "loud boos throughout her performance [on Saturday] and finished fifth" — despite considerable efforts by countries such as the UK to manipulate yet another win for Israel.

The popular mood in Sweden was reflected in huge pro-Palestinian mobilisations and impromptu concerts in Malmö that dwarfed the tiny Zionist gatherings in the run-up to the extravaganza.

Among the performers, antagonists of Israeli fascism stretched from the unfairly disqualified Dutch singer Joost Klein to Ireland's Bambie Thug, whose dress rehearsal included facial make-up that spelt out "ceasefire" and "freedom for Palestine", which they were obliged to remove before the rehearsal.

The latter's home nation, meanwhile, staged Shine on Palestine: An Alternative Eurovision in Galway on the eve of the finals in Malmö.

I confess I have never taken Eurovision seriously as a musical proposition, and on the few occasions I have been obliged to witness parts of it — the first time was in 1981, when I was a baby-sitting a niece

who was thrilled by Bucks Fizz gaining the top slot on the basis of an execrable tune — I held back my opinion. Years later, I watched segments to placate my own kids, but my impression was always the same: with occasional exceptions, it was a load of codswallop — expertly choreographed bilge. That impression only deepened when all too many of the acts began performing mostly in English rather than in their native tongues. Back in 1982, France described it a "monument to drivel" and refused to send an entrant that year.

This year's French contestant, Slimane, declared: "We need to be united by music, yes, but with love for peace." Many of the contestants appeared to share his view, even if they didn't withdraw from Eurovision. Music has for millennia provided a soundtrack to distress, disillusion, revolt and revolution. Eurovision was never intended to be a part of that — and, by and large, that reactionary impulse has been sustained. But in recent days one is reminded yet again that the real world can't be excluded, with the drivel-fests "united by music" signposts in Malmö being graffitied over to spell "united by genocide".

— By arrangement with Dawn



Malign motive

Court order quashing arrest lays bare police design to circumvent due process

The Supreme Court of India's order invalidating the arrest and remand of *New-Click* founder Prabir Purkayastha is much more than a technical outcome based on the failure of the Delhi police to furnish the grounds for his arrest in writing. It is also an indictment of the clandestine manner in which the police sought to obtain his custody. As if invoking the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act against the web portal was not malign enough – the case seems fictional in its entirety, and establishes no overt act that can even be described as unlawful, much less a terrorist act – the police seemed to have resorted to what the Court called a “blatant attempt to circumvent the due process of law”. The Court did not go into the merits of the case at this stage, but said enough to warrant an adverse inference about the absence of bona fides. Mr. Purkayastha was produced before a remand judge before dawn and his police custody obtained at 6 a.m., even though the police had the entire day to comply with the statutory requirement of producing him before a court within 24 hours. The police kept his lawyer in the dark about the early morning proceedings, and instead had a ‘remand advocate’ readily present during the proceedings. The idea was “to confine the accused to police custody without informing him the grounds on which he has been arrested; deprive the accused of the opportunity to avail the services of the legal practitioner of his choice so as to oppose the prayer for police custody remand, seek bail and also to mislead the court”.

The judgment is also notable for extending, to the UAPA, the principle laid down in *Pankaj Bansal* (2023) that those arrested under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act should be given the grounds of their arrest in writing. In fact, interpreting the relevant constitutional provisions, the Court says this may be required as a matter of course and without any exception for the arrest of any person under the UAPA or any other offences. The police recently filed a charge sheet in this case, which makes the outlandish claim that Mr. Purkayastha was funded by the Chinese government and that he and American millionaire Neville Roy Singham were involved in an alleged conspiracy to replace Indian democracy with a party-state system as in China. It speaks of their support to fomenting riots and protests in India and even funding terrorists. Given the grave, even if far-fetched, nature of the allegations against him, regular bail would have been difficult to come by. Therefore, it is salutary that the Court has treated the level of adherence to procedure – the need to furnish the grounds of arrest in this case – as sacrosanct.

Trade imbalance

A sharp spike in the import bill blights April's mild uptick in exports

India's merchandise exports, which shrank over 3% in 2023-24 – a year marred by multiple geopolitical and logistical disruptions to global trade – are off to a positive start this year, but only just. This April recorded outbound shipments worth \$34.99 billion, reflecting a meagre uptick of 1.07% or \$370 million from a year ago. As many as 17 of India's top 30 export items reported year-on-year contractions, compared with 13 in the previous month. Significantly, these declines are over a weak base – in April 2023, goods exports had tanked 12.7% and 20 of the top 30 items had reported a fall in export values. The minor growth last month was largely driven by just four items, pharma, chemicals, electronics and, most importantly, petroleum products, which recovered from a 35% contraction in March, aided by the rise in global oil prices. On the flip side, the surge in oil and gold prices through April lifted the country's goods import bill by 10.25% to over \$54 billion. As a result, last month's trade deficit was the highest in four months at \$19.1 billion, and nearly 22.5% over March's gap. If the OPEC+ club, which meets in early June, decides to extend output cuts, oil prices could well hit \$100 a barrel. Moreover, a persistent global savings rush to gold as a safe haven, could keep pushing India's favourite yellow metal's prices higher. Apart from the deleterious effects of such a scenario on the domestic front (through higher fuel prices, for one), the trade balance and the rupee would be under pressure.

Global trade volumes, after tanking 1.2% in 2023, are expected to rise 2.6% this year, as per the World Trade Organization. The government is hopeful that India's key markets in the western world clock lower inflation and improved growth rates, spurring a demand bounce. However, India needs to sharpen its approach to capitalise on such a bounce and ensure that any gains that may accrue will create wealth across the domestic economy. This requires addressing the challenges facing labour-intensive sectors such as garments and footwear, where the country has been losing out to rivals, including Bangladesh and Vietnam, in recent years. The downward trend for these sectors, as well as gems and jewellery, continued in April. Tackling concerns about product quality (in spices or drugs, for example) or allegations about labour or environmental concerns (aimed at booming shrimp exports) with greater vigour, is also critical. Moreover, agricultural exports, curbed in the battle against inflation, must be reinvigorated soon, given the healthy monsoon prospects. The next government must roll up its sleeves quickly to rev up the export growth engine and ensure trade balances do not turn unwieldy.

In the last three years, the COVID-19 vaccine has generated a lot of public interest as a possible risk factor for blood clot formation, resulting in sudden cardiac arrest. However, a proven, bigger, and preventable risk factor for heart attack and brain stroke, i.e., hypertension, rarely gets due public attention. Let us dive deep into high blood pressure and its public health relevance.

In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report, the first ever on hypertension, titled “Global report on hypertension: the race against a silent killer”. Hypertension was considered a silent killer as people often are not aware about high blood pressure till they develop complications. High blood pressure is the single most important risk factor for early deaths, leading to an estimated 10.8 million preventable deaths every year, globally. High blood pressure causes more deaths than other leading risk factors, such as tobacco use and high blood sugar. The number of adults with hypertension nearly doubled in the last three decades (since 1990) to reach 1.3 billion. Globally, an estimated 46% of adults with hypertension are unaware that they have the condition, and less than half (42%) with hypertension are diagnosed and treated. Only one in five adults (21%) with hypertension has it under control.

The Indian Council of Medical Research-India Diabetes (ICMR-INDIAB) study has estimated that in India, 311 million people (or one in every three adults) have hypertension. In the country, adults with hypertension are threefold of the estimated 101 million people living with diabetes.

Cut the salt

Excess dietary salt intake (five grams or more per day), one of the key risk factors to hypertension, contributed to two million cardiovascular disease deaths in 2019. Research studies have shown that by reducing salt, cardiovascular disease risks can be reduced by 30% and mortality by 20%. Indian adults consume on average eight to 11 grams of salt per day, which is approximately twice that of the WHO recommended daily salt intake. High salt intake is responsible for an estimated 1,75,000 deaths in India.

Hypertension is not an issue for any one socio-economic group. A Delhi-based non-governmental organisation, Foundation for People-centric Health Systems, conducted 50 health camps in five localities of Delhi and Gurugram, from October 2023 to March 2024, and screened and treated around 12,000 people. Most of the people were women, migrant workers, and rickshaw and taxi drivers, nearly all from low income groups. A large number of them were found to have diabetes and hypertension, a majority of cases detected for the first time in these camps, indicating the gaps in terms of awareness, detection and treatment.

In India, the government has set a target of putting 75 million people with hypertension



Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya

a medical doctor, was formerly with the World Health Organization. He is a consultant physician at the Centre for Health and Wellness, a primary health-care initiative based out of New Delhi



Dr. Balram Bhargava

a medical doctor and cardiologist, is the former Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi, and, currently, President of the National Academy of Sciences, India

Indians need to have greater awareness about the long-term impact of untreated hypertension and the danger of excess dietary salt intake

and/or diabetes on standard care by 2025. The India Hypertension Control Initiative (IHCI), a collaborative project of the ICMR, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare/Directorate General of Health Services, WHO India and other partners, was initiated in November 2017 in 25 districts in five States of India.

Simple and scalable

The IHCI follows five simple and scalable strategies, implemented through primary health care. The IHCI rolled out simplified drug and dose-specific treatment protocols for primary-care settings. It also focused on strengthening the drug supply chain by including protocol-based drugs in the State essential drug list; the forecasting of drugs based on morbidity, and ensuring adequate budget allocation in annual plans to purchase hypertension medication. The IHCI has also followed team-based and decentralised care. In addition, components to make health services patient-centric by measures such as the dispensing of 30 days of medicine in every patient visit are part of the initiative. It has also used information systems for programme monitoring.

Nearly six years of IHCI implementation has resulted in two major programmatic learnings. First, the development of simple treatment protocols with fewer drugs, ensuring reliable drug supply, linking patients to facilities closer to home for follow-up and engaging teams increases access and utilisation of health services from government facilities, by bringing people to health services. Second, simplified programme monitoring makes programme performance assessment both quantifiable and actionable. The IHCI won the ‘2022 UN Interagency Task Force, and WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care Award’. The IHCI was expanded to 140-plus districts of India, in 2023.

Seventy-six million cardiovascular deaths and 450 million disability adjusted life years (DALYs) would be avoided, if countries, with proven interventions, mobilise to achieve the goal of 50% population hypertension control by 2050. An estimated 4.6 million deaths can be prevented in India by 2040 if half the hypertensive population has its blood pressure under control. This will help countries achieving the targets under their National Health Policy along with global targets and commitments such as universal health coverage.

What should be done? First, raise awareness about the risk of and long-term adverse impact of untreated hypertension. High blood pressure can affect the entire vascular system (multiple organs including the heart, kidneys, brain and eyes).

Second, scale up evidence-based public health interventions such as the IHCI. Strategies and lessons from such experiences should be used to design and implement interventions to prevent and control other lifestyle diseases such as

diabetes mellitus and chronic kidney diseases.

Third, the interventions in health programmes are often targeted on modifiable risk factors. However, there are non-modifiable risk factors such as family history, an age of over 65 years and pre-existing comorbidities such as diabetes and/or kidney disease, all of which make a person at higher risk of hypertension. India already has a high burden of each of these non-modifiable risk factors: high burden of hypertension (a family risk factor for future generation); high burden of comorbidities and a rapidly rising elderly population. Therefore, hypertension control initiatives in India need to focus on the healthy adults as well, who may have known non-modifiable risk factors.

Fourth, intensify efforts to reduce dietary salt consumption using strategies such as ‘SHAKE the salt habit’ under the WHO's HEARTS strategy. Under SHAKE, there are five approaches: of Surveillance to measure and monitor salt use; Harness industry to promote and reformulate foods and meals that contain less salt; Adopt to standard labelling and marketing; Knowledge, educate and communicate to empower individuals to eat less salt; Environment – support settings that promote healthy eating.

Fifth, lifestyle diseases demand multi-sectoral actions. In 2017, India developed and approved a multi-sectoral plan for the prevention and the control of non-communicable diseases. These plans must be revisited and more concrete actions done by key sectors. We need to leapfrog to this as soon as possible.

Sixth, having informed citizens is the key to control hypertension at the population level. Raise awareness about salt in food. There is invisible salt in the form of pickles, breads, *namkeen* and *papad*. Food packages need to have better labelling of items/packets in terms of low, medium and high salt content. People also need to be sensitised to read food package labels and make informed decisions.

Seventh, stronger enforcement of food regulation in India has the potential to prevent many diseases and reduce the burden on health services. There needs to be higher taxation on high salt (and also high sugar, high fat) food and other packaged products.

Regular BP checks

Take Control. Regular checking of one's blood pressure should become an integral part of lifestyle. Access to BP apparatus needs to be increased in public places such as malls, shops and pharmacies, where people can have their BP measured either free or at nominal and affordable charges. Every office and workplace needs to have a functional BP apparatus and employees should be encouraged to check their BP regularly. Every single visit to health-care providers should be used to measure one's BP. Physicians should advise/sensitise people to measure and monitor their BP.

Politics served with concise social media content

The nature of information dissemination is changing rapidly and India is not immune to these sweeping changes. Traditional analyses of information consumption, which focus on the medium, often overlook the profound shifts in human psychology, driven by the rise of social media. This shift has led to instant gratification becoming the norm, impacting political narratives, with the potential to alter election outcomes. In India, growing social media use in the vernacular languages, combined with a largely unregulated digital space and a highly competitive, polarised political environment, necessitates vigilance to manage disruptive misinformation.

‘Going viral’ as objective

Recent studies such as “Accelerating Dynamics of Collective Attention” which was published in *Nature*, highlight a dramatic decline in human attention spans – from 2.5 minutes two decades ago to just 45 seconds today. This decline is mirrored in the popularity of concise social media content, i.e., short videos of less than a minute and ‘articles’ that span less than 200 characters. Short and snappy content is easier to produce. The focus is on the potential of the content to go viral rather than the content itself. Such content, which is much easier to produce and designed for ‘viral spread’ rather than depth, enables previously obscure figures to become influential by catering to short attention spans. Social media algorithms exacerbate this by promoting viral content, which often drowns out more substantial, factual narratives. Thus, it is entirely possible that factually unsound content travels around the world several times faster before rebuttals can even be thought of.

This new reality is not lost on political parties. The potential for this new paradigm to



Ashwin Ravi

is a practising data scientist who tracks social and demographic trends

The popularity of concise social media content has the potential to impact political outcomes

significantly reduce the asymmetry in social media power among political outfits is immense. In India, it is assumed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a much higher and more effective social media presence than the Congress. In fact, many analysts on both sides of the political spectrum attribute the BJP's political dominance since 2014 to a significant first mover advantage. While the Congress relied on rallies and long-winding speeches, the BJP switched to new age media, dominating Facebook, Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp. It is only since the 2019 general election that the Congress has invested significantly in social media. Analysis of follower counts and engagement statistics across platforms prove that the BJP still has the edge. But there is significant churn underway.

An inversion of roles

Viral political content is a strong indicator of how quickly political narratives can be set and propagated. As an example, a recent video by vlogger Dhruv Rathee, titled “Is India Becoming a Dictatorship”, went viral, becoming a topic of discussion on several forums. This is significantly larger than any video posted by the political Opposition. An analysis of the video reveals that the information presented is not new – these are commonly traded political accusations often treated as par for the course in political debates. But the content was designed to go viral – different parts of the 30-minute video can be easily edited into simple one-minute sections and tailored to appeal to shortening attention spans.

Such context free splicing of content did happen – arguments were shortened, facts were pushed aside and context was ignored. Hundreds of ‘shorts’ spawned from the main video resulting in a narrative firestorm that BJP sympathisers struggled to keep up with. This article is an

illustration of how algorithms and low attention spans allow specific types of content to organically propagate at an astounding rate.

The political Opposition was quick to latch on and the video remained in popular consciousness for well over two weeks. For the first time in many months the BJP seemed to be on the back foot. What is unique about this case is that the narrative was set by an apparently independent content creator and then amplified by political parties. This is a marked inversion from earlier when politicians delivered the talking points and other agents took on the role of amplification. This ‘inversion’ of roles is becoming more apparent in the social media strategies of the Opposition – a marked reliance on supposedly independent social media influencers to generate ‘viral’ content followed by an amplification powered by political leaders.

Analysis is more difficult now

This ‘inversion’ of roles is bound to have a significant impact. The checks and balances in the media, which have already eroded significantly, will continue on their path to irrelevance. Democratisation of content creation and algorithms that seek to capitalise on shrinking attention spans has resulted in a truly level playing field, where large pockets for social media spends matter less than having content that is tailored to gratify instantly. This makes analysis of the political headwinds more difficult. Merely analysing election time utterances is no longer sufficient. Conventional messaging is now under-girded by social media where narratives are generated on a whim, influencing millions in their wake. The party that can bring a semblance of control over this tumult will reap the benefits and it is not clear who is winning this battle for attention.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Court on arrest

The Supreme Court of India invalidating the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, a journalist and an online portal founder, on account of the total disregard by the Delhi police for the established procedure to be followed in such arrest, should be a lesson for the investigating agencies concerned (Page 1, May 16). The Court's ruling is

significant as it has emphasised that proper procedure and due process are “guardrails” against arbitrary actions, even in stringent terror cases. Will the police authorities concerned be brought to justice for keeping a citizen behind bars for over seven months following his illegal arrest? Unless exemplary punishment is awarded for such illegal acts by the

police, there will be many more instances of this kind in future.

S.K. Choudhury,
Bengaluru

The UAPA was designed to combat terrorism but its misuse threatens free speech and dissent, eroding the very foundations of democracy. When journalists fear reprisals for reporting on sensitive

issues, investigative journalism suffers, denying citizens access to critical information. The top court's intervention highlights the need for robust safeguards against arbitrary arrests. Our judiciary must continue to play a vigilant role in upholding constitutional rights.

Kurian Mathew,
Kochi

Man-animal conflict

India's high rate of urbanisation has caused the hasty expansion of human settlements into areas that were once exclusively wildlife habitats (‘State of Play’, Opinion page, May 16). With vaguely defined boundaries for fauna, human-occupied areas have increasingly become zones for wandering wild animals. Conflict with wildlife has

reached unprecedented levels, leading to retaliatory animal killings. Population increase and the demand for natural resources have led to the fragmentation of natural habitats. Mitigation of human-wildlife conflict is thus becoming one of the major concerns for wildlife managers and the scientific community.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Should reservation in jobs only be in proportion to the population?



Sukhdeo Thorat
is the former chairman of the University Grants Commission and Professor Emeritus at JNU

PARLEY

During his election campaign, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has often used the slogan 'jiti abadi, utna haq' (the rights of a group are proportionate to the group's share in the total population). The Prime Minister has lashed out at him for the slogan and others have argued that it is against the spirit of the Constitution. Should reservation in jobs only be in proportion to the population? Sukhdeo Thorat and Sudheendra Kulkarni discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Abhinay Lakshman**. Edited excerpts:



Sudheendra Kulkarni
served as an aide to Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Prime Minister's Office

This slogan is not new. It has a unique place in the history of India's social justice politics. What is the salient difference in how it was used in Kanshi Ram's time and how it is being used now? What does it really mean? Whose population and what right is the slogan talking about?

Sukhdeo Thorat: One of the justifications for a caste census is that Indian society is highly diversified and exclusionary. Very few countries have a group-specific policy like we have. We combine policies that are focused on individuals and at the same time we focus on groups as a whole. Over the last 20 years, you will see that there has been an increase in demand for group-specific policies: for certain SCs (Scheduled Castes), STs (Scheduled Tribes), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), those above OBCs such as the Patels and Marathas, and now low-income groups, and women. That is simply because of the character of our society where certain groups face discrimination from having an equal access to opportunity and equal rights.

Increasingly, the issue is that the government is surrendering to some groups due to pressure and providing group-specific policies without sufficient information. That is why we find arguments for caste-wise data, sub-caste-wise data – so that we can study it and the government can take a position based on that. When I was chairman of ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science and Research), I was asked to justify reservation at the Centre for the Jat community. We were not given caste census data for the Jats. But we were given five reports of five States and those reports were very poor. This is an example to say that if we want to have group-specific policies, we should have group-specific information about human development indicators, poverty, income, malnutrition, education, and ownership of means of production. That, I think, is the justification of the Congress.

Sudheendra Kulkarni: This slogan did not start with Kanshi Ram. In some ways, it has its origins in the debates and even policies of the colonial government. It is the British who introduced proportionate representation to certain sections of society. It was also supported



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi leader Manda Krishna Madiga during a public rally in Hyderabad. THE HINDU

by B.R. Ambedkar in *States and Minorities*: he made a strong case for representation proportionate to the population. In fact, he wanted erstwhile depressed classes to also be categorised as minorities. And depending on the proportion of population, he demanded representation. That was strongly opposed by the Congress and was not adopted in the Constitution. Instead, a principle of affirmative action was introduced for certain sections of society, for certain needs, that is, education and employment, which would ensure their justice and development. This was done unanimously. But in this principle, there is no concept of *jiti abadi utna haq*. This concept is patently unconstitutional. It goes against the letter and spirit of the Constitution. India is a Republic which recognises equality among citizens. Caste is not recognised as a unit in the Constitution. If it is recognised, it is only to the extent of certain policies for affirmative action.

Jiti abadi utna haq is also unimplementable. Let me give an example. We are already encountering enormous difficulties in ensuring reservation even for groups such as SCs. You know there is a strong demand for sub-categorisation among Dalits, tribal groups, and OBCs. This is because there is a strong feeling among beneficiary categories that some sub-category is taking a much larger share of the benefits and depriving others. For instance, the Madigas in Telangana are demanding sub-categorisation because they believe that the Malas, who are fewer in number, are getting more benefits. The Rohini Commission's initial findings also show that there is a tremendous imbalance even among the beneficiary groups. Affirmative action has some justification within certain frameworks. But *jiti abadi utna haq* is a divisive and unconstitutional concept. If anyone tried to implement it, it can create social chaos.

Are you saying we must find larger groups to ensure accurate representation, or should we move away from representation in totality?



Affirmative action has some justification within certain frameworks. But *jiti abadi utna haq* is a divisive and unconstitutional concept. If anyone tried to implement it, it can create social chaos.

SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

SK: The fundamental moral underpinning of the Constitution is *nyay* (justice). We are far from approaching the ideal. The question is how we move towards it. There is a tendency to focus only on the government or the formal sector of the economy. These provide employment only to a small section. So, we need to think of economic and social justice and equality in totally different terms. This means we need to think of wealth and livelihood creation at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid.

ST: Dr. Ambedkar's position was that if the reservation share of the SCs, STs (Scheduled Tribes) has to be defined, it should be in proportion to the social, economic, and educational standing of the group. He was not strictly in support of the population as an indicator for representation. He dealt with reservation in the legislature and said that it should be in proportion to the socioeconomic standing of the group. He said that the majority seats in the legislature should be reduced to a certain extent and redistributed among the social and religious minorities. And the redistribution of seats, which will also apply to jobs, should be in proportion to the economic and social standing. Nevertheless, population comes in. Because in the absence of the other indicators, at that time, population was considered to be a tentative indicator of a fair representation of a group. But that doesn't mean that it should be the ultimate indicator.

The second point is the reservation issue by social group. There is a distinction between pro-poor policies, irrespective of caste, religion, ethnicity, gender, and policies for those who are discriminated against. Affirmative action policies are necessary in addition to general policies, which are applicable to all, only for those groups which have suffered from discrimination. So, as far as reservation is concerned, in India you will have to have a policy that is for economic and educational empowerment for all, irrespective of caste and religion, and an additional policy for the group that is discriminated against. Ambedkar did not ask for reservation only in the public sector. He also asked for it in the private sector because discrimination is more rampant in the private sector than the public sector.

But the question here is, how do we determine what qualifies as a fair share?

ST: Ambedkar was clear that the fair share should be based on the socioeconomic and

education standing of the group, which can be supplemented by the population. Take, for example, Parsis or Christians. They are minorities, but they are advanced in terms of education. Their share is much, much higher than their population share. Brahmins constitute only 3.5% or 5%, but their share is several times higher than the low castes.

What should be the aim of a caste census in India?

SK: A caste census is welcome because it will reveal how many people belong to which caste or sub caste and their relative backwardness or progression. It will then show government and society what actions are needed for us to move towards greater equality. The question is, what are you going to do then with the data of the caste census? The caste census will also, among other things, reveal how certain castes who were earlier deprived and discriminated against have moved on. This will be important new information that will come out. Let us not be under the illusion or misconception that all the SCs are as discriminated against as they were 70 years ago. There is a certain section of SCs which has moved on, a section of OBCs that has moved on. Many of them are crorepati. Should their children get reservation? The concept of a creamy layer should also now be applied to the SCs. So, these are the larger issues that will be revealed by the caste census. Similarly, there are other so-called non-OBCs or upper castes who are poor. So, we need to therefore take a holistic view and not go in the direction that divides our society, that is, *jiti abadi, utna haq*.

ST: The purpose of a caste census is quite clear. It is not a census only to gain demographic data and family data. The first is that you go down from broader caste categories like SCs to sub castes. So, have a population estimate of these sub castes or even religious groups for that matter and social groups within the religion. But that certainly is not the purpose. The purpose is to know about the economic, educational, and social standing of these groups. What is their access to ownership of means of production like land, business, employment? What are their educational levels? Do they face discrimination? What is the nature of such discrimination? So a caste census will generate all this information and bring transparency. There will be shocks. The people who are opposed to a caste census are worried simply because they think that the 5% Brahmins will have a 60% share. But my point is government policy is based on evidence and data and it is a fair policy. But at the moment policies are not based on data. Policies are based on political pressures.



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NOTEBOOK

The challenge of reporting propaganda

A mischievous and selective presentation of facts can sometimes be more dangerous for democracy than pure lies

Varghese K. George

Campaigns by parties or companies are not about facts and truths, but about turning public opinion. Election campaigns often bring out the worst in our political leaders and create a particularly challenging situation for journalists who consider facts sacred. What leaders say during elections are largely kernels of truth that are puffed up so that they can claim superhuman qualities, or engage in scaremongering, or slander their opponents. When these statements are abstractions, such as someone is communal or good or bad for the country, there is nothing a journalist can do or perhaps needs to do, other than merely reporting it.

In the pre-digital era, falsehoods and misinformation had a short, localised life. Now, technology enables falsehoods to travel across continents, and remain eternally alive. What can journalism do in this scenario? How can journalists report a speech that contains falsehoods? Is it okay to merely reproduce what has been said? Is it okay to ignore the leader who is making the false statement? Can a leader's speech be fact-checked real time?

When statements are distortions, not white lies, what can reporters do? If a leader who is about to assume power spouts lies, is it responsible journalism to black out those statements? Is it sufficient to counter-pose one statement to the other – for instance, leader X said the 'sun rises in the east' and leader Y said the 'sun rises in the west'?

When a statement which must be reported is factually wrong, the reporting must explain it, ideally by quoting sources. For instance, what the Bharatiya Janata Party says about the Congress manifesto can be easily verified. But when it says

India would have been a superpower if Sardar Patel and not Jawaharlal Nehru had become the first Prime Minister, there is nothing a journalist can do apart from reporting that statement.

But more than lies, misinformation and misinterpretation are greater threats as fact-checking may not help in such cases; providing context and explaining the background of the piece of information is more valuable. A case in point is the recent cacophony over Muslim population growth. A mischievous and selective presentation of facts can sometimes be more dangerous for democracy than pure lies because the claim of factual accuracy is also made along with it.

This also leads us to the point of numbers never lying. Diametrically opposite arguments about the economy proliferate, all of them using numbers, tables, and graphs. Taking surveys and data as unquestionable containers of truth or facts is not entirely free of problems, as Rukmini S. explains in her book *Whole Numbers and Half Truths*. For instance, surveys that attempt to quantify qualitative attributes such as communalism or pluralism may not necessarily capture the reality. Will any communal bigot admit to being one, to a surveyor? Numbers and data can help a journalist arrive at a fuller picture, but not the full picture. All this makes the reporting of election campaigns both challenging and fascinating.

To bring the best factual and unbiased picture to the audience, a journalist will have to use data, context, and background information in a skillful manner. Counter propaganda masquerading as journalism is as dangerous to journalism as propaganda which, by definition, is not bound by facts.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A display of patriotic pageantry



Russian President Vladimir Putin and the heads of foreign states lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier after the Victory Day military parade in central Moscow on May 9. Russia is celebrating the 79th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. AFP

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1974

New wall proposed to protect shore temple

Madras: In a major effort to protect the temple complex on the shore of Mahabalipuram from the ravages of waves, a groyne wall is to be built, pushing back the waterfront by a further 125 feet away from the existing protection walls, constructed over three decades ago. Estimated to cost over Rs. 26 lakhs, the

proposed wall will not strike a full semi-circle, but leave a gap on the southern side. The construction work, to be entrusted to the Madras Port Trust engineers, is expected to be completed in 18 months.

The temple complex, consisting of two temples dedicated to Lord Siva – one facing east and the other west – with a rock-cut figure of Lord Vishnu between them, is one of the outstanding monuments of Mahabalipuram. The twin shore temples, built by Rajasimha (700-725 A.D.) are among the earliest structural temples of the Pallava period in the stone medium.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1924

A radio club for Madras

A meeting was held last evening in the Dadabhoy Munzil (Ripon Buildings) by those interested in broadcasting by wireless with a view to form a radio club for Madras. There was a large gathering of Europeans and Indians present and Mr. Y. Tirumalai Pillai, the President of the Municipal Corporation, was voted to the chair.

Mr. A.O. Coningsby, a representative of the Marconi Company, addressed the meeting on the working and progress of the radio clubs in England and some of those recently organised in Bombay and Calcutta.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of people hospitalised after food poisoning

90 In a suspected food poisoning case, close to 100 people were admitted to different hospitals after consuming eatables during a temple feast in Maharashtra's Nanded district. PTI

Number of properties attached by the NIA since 2019

403 Properties, including multiple bank accounts and cash worth crores, have been attached by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) across the country since 2019. PTI

Air passenger traffic in India in FY24, as per rating agency Icra

376.4 million. India's air passenger traffic is projected to touch record levels in the range of 407-418 million in the current financial year (FY25). PTI

The share of Covaxin takers with adverse events: BHU

30 in percentage. Nearly one-third of 926 individuals who received Bharat Biotech's Covaxin reported 'adverse events of special interest,' according to a one year follow-up study by BHU. PTI

Loan approved by ADB to improve power supply in Sikkim

148 in \$ million. The Asian Development Bank has approved a loan to help enhance the reliability, quality and resilience of electricity supply in Sikkim. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The use of AI in drug development

What are target proteins and how are they identified? How do AI-based tools AlphaFold 3 and RoseTTAFold All-Atom help in predicting the correct target protein and its interactions with drugs? Where does India stand in the field of computational drug development?

EXPLAINER

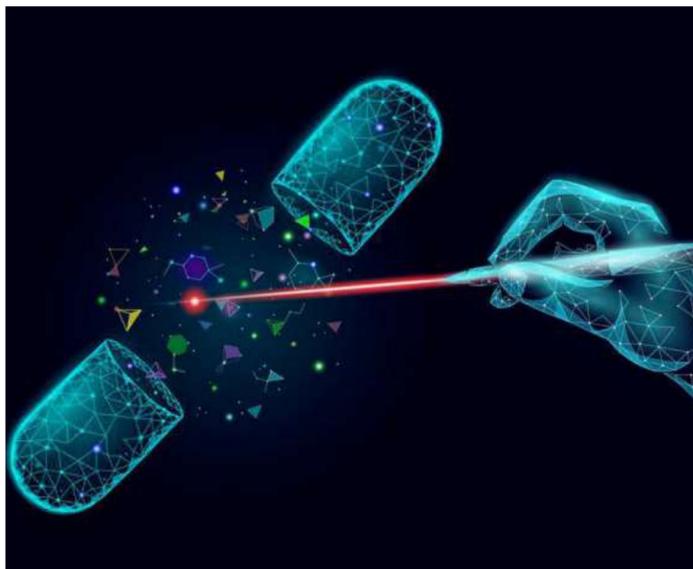
Binay Panda

Drug development is an expensive and time-consuming process. However, the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has opened up a world of possibilities with respect to fast-tracking drug development.

How does the process start?

The process of developing a drug starts with identifying and validating a target. A target is a biological molecule (usually a gene or a protein) to which a drug directly binds in order to work. The overwhelming majority of targets are proteins. Only those proteins with ideal sites where drugs can go and dock to do their business are druggable proteins.

Target proteins are identified in the discovery phase, wherein a target protein sequence is fed into a computer which looks for the best-fitting drug out of millions in the library of small molecules for which the structures are stored in the computer. The process assumes that the structures of the target protein and drug are known. If not, the computer uses models to understand the sites where a drug can bind. This discovery process avoids time-consuming laboratory experiments that require expensive chemicals and reagents and have a high failure rate. Once the suitable protein target and its drug are identified, the research moves to the pre-clinical phase, where the potential drug candidates are tested outside a biological system, using cells and animals for the drug's safety and toxicity. After this, as part of the clinical phase, the drug is tested on a small number of human patients before being used on more patients for efficacy and safety. Finally, the drug undergoes regulatory approval and marketing and post-market survey phases. Due to a high failure rate, the discovery phase limits the number of drugs that pass and carry on to



GETTY IMAGES

the pre-clinical and clinical phases.

How can AI help this process?

AI has the potential to revolutionise target discovery and understand drug-target interaction by drastically cutting down time, increasing the accuracy of prediction of interaction between a drug and its target, and saving money. The development of two AI-based prediction tools, AlphaFold and RoseTTAFold, developed by researchers at DeepMind, a Google company, and the University of Washington, U.S., respectively, has provided a major scientific breakthrough in the last four years in the area of computational drug development. Both tools are based on deep neural networks. The tools' neural networks use massive amounts of input data to produce the desired output – the three-dimensional structures of proteins. Published recently, the new avatars of AlphaFold and

RoseTTAFold, called AlphaFold 3 (developed jointly by Isomorphic Labs, a DeepMind spinoff) and RoseTTAFold All-Atom, respectively, take the capability of these tools to an entirely new level. The significant difference between the upgraded versions and their previous forms is their capability to predict not just static structures of proteins and protein-protein interactions but also their ability to predict structures and interactions for any combination of protein, DNA, and RNA, including modifications, small molecules and ions. Additionally, the new versions use generative diffusion-based architectures (one kind of AI model) to predict structural complexes. In a test with 400 interactions between targets and their small molecule drugs, AlphaFold 3 accurately predicted their interactions 76% of the time versus 40% by RoseTTAFold All-Atom.

What are the drawbacks?

With all the promise and potential in drug development, AI tools have limitations. For example, the tools can, at best, provide up to 80% accuracy in predicting interactions (the accuracy comes down drastically for protein-RNA interaction predictions). Second, the tools can only aid a single phase of drug development, target discovery and drug-target interaction. It will still have to go through the pre-clinical and clinical development phases, and there is no guarantee that the AI-derived molecules will result in success in those phases. Third, one of the challenges with diffusion-based architecture is model hallucinations, where insufficient training data causes the tool to produce incorrect or non-existent predictions. Finally, unlike the previous versions of AlphaFold, DeepMind has not released the code for AlphaFold 3, restricting its independent verification, broad utilisation and use for protein-small molecule interaction studies.

What about India?

Developing new AI tools for drug development requires large-scale computing infrastructure, especially ones with fast Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) to run multiple tasks with longer sequences. GPU chips are expensive, and with newer and faster ones being produced by hardware makers every year, they have a quick expiration date. India needs such large-scale computing infrastructure. That, along with a lack of skilled AI scientists, unlike in the U.S. and China, is the second reason why researchers in India could not establish a first-mover advantage in developing AI tools for drug development despite the country having a rich history in protein X-ray crystallography, modelling and other fields of structural biology. However, with a growing number of pharmaceutical organisations, India can lead the way in applying AI tools in target discovery, identification, and drug testing. Binay Panda is Professor at JNU, New Delhi and posts at @ganitlabs.

THE GIST

▼ The process of developing a drug starts with identifying and validating a target. A target is a biological molecule (usually a gene or a protein) to which a drug directly binds in order to work.

▼ AI has the potential to revolutionise target discovery and understand drug-target interaction by drastically cutting down time, increasing the accuracy of prediction of interaction between a drug and its target, and saving money.

▼ The development of two AI-based prediction tools, AlphaFold and RoseTTAFold, developed by researchers at DeepMind, a Google company, and the University of Washington, U.S., respectively, has provided a major scientific breakthrough in the area of computational drug development.

Can parties be de-recognised or de-registered?

Does the Election Commission have the power to de-recognise a political party for violation of the MCC?

Rangarajan R

The story so far:

The Election Commission of India (ECI) in its report on enforcement of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) has stated that it expects star campaigners to lead by example and not vitiate the fabric of society. This has raised a debate about ECI powers to rein in MCC violations.

What are registered parties?

Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (RP Act) lays down the requirements for registration of a political party with the ECI. Any political party that seeks registration should submit a copy of its memorandum/constitution. Such document should declare that the party shall bear true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India. It should also bear allegiance to the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy, and uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India. Registered political

parties enjoy the following legal benefits – (a) tax exemption for donations received under Section 13A of the Income Tax Act, 1961, (b) common symbol for contesting general elections to the Lok Sabha/State Assemblies, and (c) twenty 'star campaigners' during election campaign. As per the ECI, there are 2,790 active registered political parties in India.

What are recognised parties?

A registered party is referred to as a Registered Unrecognised Political Party (RUPP). Political parties are recognised as a 'national' or 'State' party under the provisions of The Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968 (Symbols Order) by the ECI. The criteria for recognition at the 'national' or 'State' level consists of winning requisite number of seats and/or obtaining required percentage of votes in a general election to Lok Sabha or State Assembly. At present, there are six 'national' parties, and sixty-one 'State' parties that have been recognised. These recognised

parties enjoy additional concessions of having a reserved symbol during elections and forty 'star campaigners'.

What are the issues?

It has been noticed that less than a third of RUPPs contest elections. The RP Act does not confer explicit powers on the ECI to de-register any political party if it fails to contest elections, conduct inner-party elections or lodge requisite returns. The Supreme Court in *Indian National Congress versus Institute of Social Welfare & Ors* (2002) had held that the ECI does not have power to de-register any political party under the RP Act. It may de-register only under exceptional circumstances like registration being obtained by fraud or the political party ceasing to have allegiance to the Constitution or if it is declared unlawful by the Government. The RUPPs that don't contest elections raise concerns over the possible misuse of income tax exemption and donations collected being used for money laundering.

The MCC prohibits using caste and communal feelings to secure votes, and bribing or intimidation of voters. Recognised political parties are guilty of violating the MCC on various occasions. However, it has been observed that the ECI on such occasions at best bars leaders from campaigning for a short period of two to three days.

What needs to be done?

The ECI in its memorandum for electoral reforms (2016) has suggested amendment to the law that would empower the ECI to deregister a party. The Law Commission in its 255th report (2015) on 'Electoral reforms' has also recommended amendments for de-registration of a political party if it fails to contest elections for 10 consecutive years. These recommendations should be implemented. Under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols order, the ECI has the power to suspend or withdraw recognition of a recognised political party for its failure to observe MCC or follow lawful directions of the Commission. It has probably been used only once for three weeks in 2015 when the recognition of National People's Party was suspended for failure to follow the directions of the ECI. Strict action under this provision would have a salutary effect in ensuring adherence to the MCC.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He trains civil-service aspirants at 'Officers IAS Academy'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

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IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from *Aattam*.

Invisible and forgettable: the missing women of Malayalam cinema

This recent trend of women being invisibilised in Malayalam cinema is seen as a kind of reversal after a decade of several films having strong women characters. This happened with the shift from star-driven films of the early 2000s to more character-driven dramas in the 2010s

S. R. Praveen

Kerala has a sex ratio of 1,084 as per the last recorded Census of 2011, indicating a population of 1,084 females to every 1,000 males. However, looking at some of the more popular films in Malayalam today, one cannot be blamed for thinking there is a serious dearth in the female population in the State.

Even as Malayalam cinema is arguably going through one of its best phases ever as far as box office performance is concerned, some of the recent hits have faced criticism for either their complete absence of women or the lack of substantial characters for the few women who get some screen space.

A worrying trend

Take the case of *Aavesham*, Jithu Madhavan's roaring hit carried mostly by Fahadh Faasil's uninhibited act, that has raked in over ₹150 crore at the box office. Parts of the film are set in a college campus, but not even a single girl from the campus gets a prominent presence or even a line of dialogue. The only women characters are stereotypes; that of the mother of one of the youngsters, who is present mostly as a voice asking "Are you happy?" to anyone who talks to her on the phone, and that of a sex worker. In the case of *Malayalee From India*, another recent release, Anaswara Rajan, one of the more promising young actors in the industry, occupies prominent space in the posters, but all that she gets in the film is a cameo role stretching barely 10 minutes. That too, a role without any consequence to the film's narrative. The only other

woman to get even a noticeable role is Manju Pillai, as the protagonist's mother. Kalyani Priyadarshan and Neeta Pillai get similarly inconsequential roles in Vineeth Sreenivasan's *Varshangalkku Shesham*. Infact, they barely get a few more scenes than what is shown of them in the film's trailer. The role of Bhavana in the recent Tovino Thomas-starrer *Nadikar* is no better. *Manjummel Boys*, the highest grosser in the history of Malayalam cinema, as well as *Aadujeevitham* have also faced criticism for not providing roles with any scope for performance for women, but these can be excused as films based on real stories.

Even though short, *Manjummel Boys* did paint a moving portrait of a woman suffering with her son who had got back home after surviving an ordeal, the true horror of which gets revealed to her only later. The only exception among the recent crop of box office or OTT successes are *Premalu*, in which Mamitha Baiju gets to play a confident and successful woman, who is at the centre of the narrative, *Aattam*, one of the best films of the year in which Zarin Shihab gets a role of a lifetime and *Neru*, in which Anaswara has a role equivalent to Mohanlal's.

A sudden invisibilisation

This recent trend of women being invisibilised from Malayalam cinema is seen as a kind of reversal after a decade of several films having strong women characters. This happened with the shift from predominantly star-driven films of the early 2000s to more screenplay and character-driven dramas in the 2010s, with films ranging from *Ozhimuri* and *22 Female Kottayam* to *The Great Indian*

Kitchen, *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* and *Take Off*.

Even in films where women were not the protagonists, they did have memorable roles, like in *Maheshinte Prathikaram* or *Kammatipadam*. While women characters in Malayalam cinema till 2010, with a few exceptions like the films of K. G. George, were seen through the eyes of patriarchy, and were expected to be submissive and chaste, the films that came in the 2010s broke these unwritten, but widely followed, norms. Seen in this context, the arrival of such a large number of mainstream films, one after the other, with not even a single woman character who would leave an impression, is bound to raise eyebrows. Although, it is clear that there is no evil machine working in the background to ensure such a scenario, the fact that so many filmmakers would think that women characters are dispensable points to a problem.

However, a celebratory atmosphere, when everyone is talking about the unprecedented box office success of film after film, is not really conducive for this debate, as evident in the reactions to a few social media posts from women raising this point. The majority of the comments under these posts were dismissive of such arguments questioning the absence of women characters, while some were downright abusive. Some actors like Nikhila Vimal have argued that it is better to have a few films with well-written women characters than women being included in films for the sake of representation. The demand certainly is not for virtuous women characters, but roles with positive,

negative or grey shades that would atleast leave some kind of an impression.

The role of institutions

It might be a coincidence that this invisibilisation of women from cinema is happening at the same time that the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) is away from the spotlight. The WCC, formed in 2017 in the aftermath of an actor's complaint of sexual assault allegedly masterminded by actor Dileep, was in its initial days highly vocal about changing the status quo in the industry and taking on the powers that be, but has been relatively silent of late. The report by the Justice Hema Committee, formed after the actor assault to look at ways to improve women's safety and security in Malayalam cinema, salary packages and service conditions, and to create a conducive working environment, has also been gathering dust, four years after it was submitted to the State government.

However, the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC), under the government, has over the past four years been funding a project to promote women filmmakers. Most of the films under the project including *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare*, *Nisshidho*, *Nila* and *Divorce* have garnered appreciation at film festivals. Despite such attempts, representation for women in mainstream cinema often depends on the whims and fancies of men, who form a majority of the writers and filmmakers in Malayalam cinema. We are in the middle of a season of scant representation, a state of affairs not very encouraging for the many women waiting to break into the industry, in front of and behind the camera.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmaniam

"Compose, compile (S. Bhavani, Calcutta)."

"To compose" means "to create or construct".

You must compose a poem on Kalidasa. He composed a beautiful sonnet on Nature.

"To compile" is "to collect (material) into a list, volume, etc". He compiled an anthology of short stories.

It is not an easy thing to compile a dictionary.

When you compose, you do something original. When you compile, you put together what is already available.

"Lengthy (S. Aluwalia, Nagpur)"

"Lengthy" does not mean just "long". It means "too long, tedious".

It was a lengthy speech.

It was a lengthy explanation.

It is a lengthy process."

"Nicety (K. K. Rajender, Kozhikode)"

"Nicety" means "subtlety, accuracy, fine details".

I don't understand the niceties of his arguments."

"Passed, past (Rama Bai, Tirupati)"

"Passed" is the past tense and past participle of "pass".

He passed the information to her.

He passed the examination creditably.

"Past" can be used as an adjective.

During the past one week, there has been at least one murder a day in the city.

It is also used as a preposition.

He went past my house yesterday.

She drove past the school.

"Past" is used as a noun also. When it is used as a noun, it is generally preceded by "the".

He is still living in the past.

Here it means "past time".

He is a man with a past.

"A man with a past" means "a man whose past life or career is discreditable".

It is also used as an adverb.

He has just gone past.

Use "passed" when it is a verb. In other cases, use "past".

"Ghost-writer (S. A. Afzulpurkar, Bombay)"

A ghost-writer is one who writes a book, articles or speeches for another. The ghost-writer remains in the background and the person for whom he writes gets all the credit. A ghost "is an unseen person, a disembodied spirit".

The ghost-writer is one whose name is not "seen" by the public. "Ghost-write" or "ghost" are used as verb.

He ghost-writes (or ghosts) for the minister.

His autobiography was ghost-written by her."

"Nullipara (K. A. Albert, Nagercoil)"

"Nullipara" means "a woman who has never borne a child". The "u" is pronounced like the "u" in "much" and the two "a" s are pronounced like the "a" in "India". The stress is on the second syllable."

Published in *The Hindu* on December 24, 1991.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The 94th edition of the French Open starts on May 20. Here is a quiz to test your knowledge on its history

Soorya Prakash. N

QUESTION 1

Who are all the singles winners who have won both in amateur and open eras?

QUESTION 2

What is the name of the cup presented to the men's and women's singles winners?

QUESTION 3

Name the only brother-sister duo in the open era to have won the mixed doubles crown but with different partners.

QUESTION 4

Name the twin brothers who have won the men's doubles

title.

QUESTION 5

How many doubles titles have the Indian pair of Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi won together?

QUESTION 6

Two players have won four men's doubles titles each which is the most in the open era. In fact, they have won two titles playing together too. Who are they?

QUESTION 7

Who is the only player to have won all three types of titles in the open era, that is in singles, doubles and mixed doubles?



Visual question:

Identify the players. What is common about their achievement? AFP



Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. This aviator attempted the world's first transatlantic flight by flying from Long Island, New York, to Plymouth, England. **Ans: Albert Read**

2. Gago Coutinho and Sacadura Cabral flew on three Fairey III planes from this location to Rio de Janeiro. **Ans: Lisbon**

3. In April 1913, this newspaper offered GBP 10,000 to the first aviator to undertake a transatlantic flight. **Ans: Daily Mail**

4. These two aviators took off from Newfoundland on June 14, 1919, and landed in Galway, Ireland, roughly 15 hours later. **Ans: John Alcock, Arthur Brown**

5. The American aviator who became famous for undertaking the first solo transatlantic flight in May 1927, flying from New York to Paris. **Ans: Charles Lindbergh**

Visual: Name this airship. **Ans: Graf Zeppelin**
Early Birds: Prashant Nain| Rajmohan. V| M. Suresh Kumar| Sadhan Kumar Panda| Mohd.Amaan

Word of the day

Rancorous:

showing deep-seated resentment

Synonyms: gall, bitterness, resentment

Usage: I could hear their terrible and rancorous argument.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/rancorouspro

International Phonetic

Alphabet: /ˈræŋ.kə.əs/

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

the hindu **businessline.**

FRIDAY - MAY 17, 2024

Needless jitters

Don't read too much into India VIX movement

India VIX, which captures the expectation of market participants regarding future volatility, has been receiving undue attention of late. The index has an inverse relation with the stock prices with an increase in the VIX denoting expectation of a market fall and a decline in VIX implying a future rally. With the Lok Sabha election and its results being the overarching theme these days, analysts have begun using the India VIX to predict the outcome of the ongoing polls.

The intense volatility in the market in recent weeks, with the India VIX moving close to 20 this week, the highest level in the last 22 months, is seen by many as an indication of a market crash soon, triggered by a possible adverse result at the hustings for the BJP. Such inferences are, however, stretched. The India VIX, modelled on the CBOE VIX, uses the prices that traders quote for Nifty50 option contracts to calculate the extent of annualised percentage change possible in the next 30 days. As the traders' perception of risks in the market increases, they quote higher prices, thus making the index spike. The CBOE VIX is called the market's fear gauge because of its tendency to spike sharply higher as market mood swings towards panic.

There are two reasons why the India VIX need not be taken too seriously. One, it is only a sentiment gauge and is not an indicator of any outcome. Two, the expectations of traders do not always come true. A SEBI study showed that 89 per cent of individual traders lose money on their trading calls. The share of the more sophisticated institutional investors who can take better informed decisions has been coming down in the equity derivatives section since the pandemic, with the share of retail investors currently around 35 per cent. Further, the movement of the India VIX since its launch shows that the index is not at an alarming level yet. The current level of 20 is far lower than the peak of over 80 touched in March 2020 and in November 2008. The index has typically traded between 10 and 20 over the past decade, and it continues to be within this range.

Spikes of similar magnitude were observed in the India VIX in 2014 and 2019 too, prior to the Lok Sabha election results. But the Nifty50 managed to notch strong gains in the subsequent months in both instances. The uncertainty around the election results appears to be leading to nervousness among traders this time, too. The sharp swings in stock market indices in recent weeks are also drawing a lot of attention. But such gyrations are par for the course as the stock market has been on a strong upward move since June 2022, making the Nifty50 gain 42 per cent in this period. With the relative valuations of Indian stocks appearing good, it is not surprising that domestic and foreign investors are taking some profit off the table.

FROM THE VIEWROOM.

Using nationalism to market products

Sindhu Hariharan

Last week, X, formerly Twitter, was abuzz with polarised opinions as an Indian technology company CEO, irked by diversity and inclusion policies of a global tech major, decided to hit the American company where it hurts. He took to X and announced to the world that his company would stop hosting its cloud servers on the tech giant's infrastructure and instead build their own cloud computing systems.

The Indian company in question dabbles in various businesses, and the entrepreneur has a history of leaning on nationalism to market his products. While the company's products and services have often let down customers, who have taken to all social channels to get their queries answered, the CEO continues to urge people to 'be Indian and buy Indian'. He's not the only one. Increasingly, Indian businesses are taking a leaf out of China's playbook and trying to appeal to consumers' nationalism and patriotism to market their products. While there is no doubt

that more localisation can lift the economy in terms of job creation and value accretion, one wishes companies and CXOs spent as much time strengthening products rather than painting global competitors in bad light.

It is an insult to the Indian customer's intelligence if they believe that dramatic pronouncements about competition or Swadeshi can actually translate to sales. Why must I, as a consumer, not seek out best value for my money, but only pick a product for its roots? Would the business owner compromise on input quality for his business just because they are made in India?

Focus on making the product stand on its own legs, market it for its strengths, and then see adoption soar. And let's not forget, big tech majors, despite all their commercial and cultural flaws, have helped script India's start-up story as venture investors, infrastructure and service providers. Finally, CEOs must leave the political mudslinging to politicians, and put their heads down to build world-class products.



AMARJEET SINHA

I have often been asked how I rate the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA). Being part of the team that designed SSA, it is always difficult to be fully objective.

The most convincing indictment of our failure in primary education in the first four decades as an independent nation is the 42nd Round National Sample Survey (NSS) findings of 1986-87. It had estimated that 69.23 per cent six plus females in rural India had never been enrolled in a primary school. Kothari Commission's 'The destiny of India being shaped in its classrooms' remained merely an intent without resources.

Rumblings followed the 42nd Round NSS indictment, leading ultimately to the 1993 Unnikrishnan judgment declaring education up to the age of 14 to be a fundamental right of India's children. Myron Weiner indicted Indian policymakers for not being serious about elementary education for all. Satyapal Anand's follow-up case brought the judicial pronouncement to centre-stage with Chief Secretaries having to swear affidavits on the eight areas of energisation of Universal Elementary Education (UEE).

COMMITTEES GALORE

When the judicial heat grew stronger, the Muhiram Saikia National Committee of Education Ministers (1997) was set up to assess the financial resources needed to secure UEE. The assessment of out-of-school children was 80 million and ₹40,000 crore was the additional resource need, assessed as a ballpark figure over five years.

The Tapas Majumdar Committee (1999) thereafter made the normative assessment for UEE as an additional ₹1,36,823 crore over 10 years! With Finance Ministry's reservations on resources, another committee of nine Education Ministers under Murlu Manohar Joshi was set up to re-work the additional financial need to bring it in the 'pragmatic realm of the possible'.

An additional ₹60,000 crore over a 10-year period was the result, which is what became the basis for Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. The Constitution was amended in 2002 to make elementary education a fundamental right of children aged 6-14. Subsequently, the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 was passed, albeit without a very specific financial memorandum.

The influential Public Report on Basic Education (PROBE) report 1999, carried out its field work in 1996 in States like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, said there were not enough schools, teachers and classrooms for children. The state of



Why are children not learning?

LEARNING BLUES. Besides Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a focus on learning outcomes is very important

schools was abysmal, the infrastructure inadequate and the learning outcomes deplorable. The PROBE report celebrated Himachal Pradesh for actually doing a 'schooling revolution' where all children were in schools.

It was in these tumultuous times that SSA brought hope for UEE at the turn of the century. There was a confidence that a scheme for UEE comprehensively providing for bridging all gaps, will settle the supply-side constraints.

In 2006, the same researchers carried out a PROBE Revisit Survey after a decade of efforts for UEE. The Revisit Study recorded major improvement in school participation, decline in social disparities, and improvement in schooling infrastructure, school incentives, but learning outcomes remained a challenge.

In 2014-15, the 71st Round NSS survey found the net attendance rates of boys and girls to be identical, both in rural and urban areas. Surely, the girls had voted with their feet for quality public education. It was the State that had failed to provide learning outcomes for all.

The Annual State of Education Report (ASER) 2023 on adolescents brings out

The number of schools has increased exponentially and the gender gap in enrolments has been eliminated. Improving learning outcomes is the next challenge.

how the gender gap in enrolment has nearly disappeared even at secondary school level across the country. However, the learning outcome challenges persist even in their adolescence. The National Achievement Studies of NCERT and the World Bank studies have also found unsatisfactory learning outcomes as the biggest challenge, in spite of improvement in schooling provision. Covid made the learning challenges worse.

What has not worked? Where has the failure been? Clearly, teacher recruitment and development, dysfunctional school organisation, governance and financing deficits, unsatisfactory parent-community-school partnerships for school effectiveness, need top-most attention.

QUALITY OF LEARNING

It is not enough to bridge the supply side; we need to address the quality of learning outcomes. Should schools be seen merely as polling booths and teachers as a field cadre with large non-academic responsibilities? It is time quality of learning and its measurement became central to schools.

Technology offers an opportunity to work with a diligent and dedicated teacher (not necessarily outstanding) who opens the world of knowledge and skills to children through an equitable access to e-learning supplementation of books and peer group learning.

Decentralised management of schools with funds, functions and functionalities under the charge of local governments and women's collectives is likely to

improve learning outcomes. This will also address inter-sectoral challenges, provision of gadgets for learning, and wider social determinants of school effectiveness. Reserve Bank of India's recent study on panchayats (2023) brings out the positive consequences of decentralisation in socio-economic achievements of States.

SSA provided for a 6 per cent management cost to bring in the finest professional skills of programme managers, pedagogy experts, finance managers, planners, etc., to strengthen the educational administration at the field level. We need to subject teachers to competency tests. We cannot let certificate holders masquerade as teachers. We have to be ruthless in developing a performance-based system for schools and teachers.

Teacher development needs vibrant institutions at all levels. Uninspiring State, district, block and cluster level institutions completely beats the objective of learning outcomes. Unfortunately, we focused more on all children in school and much less on all learning. Measurement does matter. Incentives alone can secure participation; learning outcomes require more than simply the supply side.

The challenge of UEE is to transform the classroom process. Measuring outcomes in a non-threatening way is the way forward. It is community owned, accountable public systems that will deliver universal quality elementary education.

The writer is a retired civil servant. Views expressed are personal

Biden and Trump game for early debates

Both realise it is going to be a tight race like in 2020, and both want to keep Robert Kennedy Jr off the track

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Finally American media outlets had something big to report: that President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump actually concurred on something! The two have agreed to debate much ahead of the traditional election time frame. The first will be hosted by CNN on June 27 followed by ABC on September 10. And for someone who is seen as an institutionalist, President Biden was the first to propose the idea but minus the involvement of the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) which has been running the show since 1988.

The Biden initiative, pushed through reporters of two media outlets covering the Trump campaign, saw CNN agreeing to hold a debate on June 27 which prompted the President to post on X: "Over to you, Donald. As you said: 'Anywhere, anytime, any place'".

According to the new format, the two debates will take place in a studio with a moderator and no live audiences. One grouse of the Biden team has been that the CPD was either "unable or unwilling" to enforce rules during the 2020 debates that included the inability

or helplessness of the moderators to cut off rambling discourses or rein in the boisterous crowd, especially in town hall settings. Reluctantly the Trump campaign had to agree to the new ground rules but the former President did say in his Truth Social post that he would rather see "more than two debates and, for excitement purposes, a very large venue".

REASON FOR CHANGE

In its letter to the Commission the Biden campaign had apparently made the point that debates in late Fall take place when early voting is already in progress, and that the existing model was geared more towards "huge spectacles" instead of "good debates". Not all have forgotten Biden's angry retort to constant interruptions from President Trump in Cleveland on September 29, 2020: "Will you shut up, man."

What has raised eyebrows is that the present format leaves out college campuses the CPD had been having in mind — in Utah, Virginia and Texas — and in the impact this could have on President Biden keeping the young college-going kids on his side. Granted that the rumblings in educational institutions from California to New York



FACE-OFF. Biden and Trump are dead-even in polls

and beyond on the goings-on in the Gaza may have dented this support group, one of Biden's strong base of support comes from college goers.

The campaigns may insist otherwise, but both Biden and Trump have good reasons to have offered and accepted early debates. Both realise that this is going to be one of those tight races with prospects of a re-run of 2020 written all over it. Nationally, Biden and Trump are dead-even in polls, but the 45th President has a slim lead over the incumbent in most of the six battleground states with perhaps the exception of Wisconsin. And much as Trump loudly claims that he is being

kept away from the campaign trail by "politically fixed" court trials in Manhattan, he would rather debate President Biden on domestic issues.

Biden and Trump would seem to have a common objective as well: keeping Robert Kennedy Jr off the track. The last word on who Kennedy Jr will hurt more is yet to be said, but it is a known fact that since 1980 third party candidates have had an impact on Presidential races. And what is a better way of keeping Kennedy Jr away from the debate format when he is yet to have his name on the ballot in all states? Kennedy Jr is obviously crying foul.

It is a long way to go to June 27. The first showdown in the CNN studios at Atlanta might not even take place. But the million dollar question has been posed to former President Trump during the last Presidential election and during the course of this election season: will you accept the result? The response in 2020 was quite chilling: "This is not going to end well. This is going to be a fraud like you've never seen". Any guess on what the formal stance will be in 2024?

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations.

✉ **LETTERS TO EDITOR** Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

Election strategy

With the fifth phase of Lok Sabha elections is round the corner, there are concerns about the direction of election campaigns, cooked-up narratives and controversies, toxic debates and, of course, the hostile summer. Several reports and analyses have been published about the low voter turnout. The internally displaced persons (IDPs), due to jobs and business, are absent from their constituencies in large numbers. Too many phases and a prolonged election period are causing fatigue and voter apathy. In a digitised society, a new election strategy with a shorter election period, fewer phases and voting facility from remote locations for IDPs should be

considered by the Election Commission.
Vinod Johri
Delhi

Surge in F&O trading

The fact that stock market participation in India has been gathering steam, with the number of demat accounts jumping from 3.59 crore in 2018-19 to 7.38 crore by October 2021, is nothing but a clear testament to the growing equity culture. However, the sharp surge in trading in futures and options (F&O) by retail investors has evoked concerns about its possible deleterious impact on investor sentiments and household finances. The fact that more than 80 per cent

of traders incur losses while trading in the F&O segment calls for more concerted protection measures for investors.

M Jeyaram
Sholavandan, TN

IPL on a different track

'IPL's identity crisis' (May 16) has really hit the nail on the head. The Indian Premier League, which values commerce above the spirit of the gentleman's game, will lose traction in the course of time as it is money — a dangerous master — that rules the roost in the competition. Players go for the kill to bag the coveted trophy. This is not, however, wrong. But what is worrying is that the sheen of sportsmanship is rubbed off sometimes in the bargain.

When that happens, the game becomes the biggest loser.
S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Health insurance

The editorial 'Unaffordable cover' (May 16) rightly highlights the plight of individual health insurance buyers: they "may be footing the bill for losses in other segments," per data analysis of Incurred Claims Ratio. With hardly any good option for reducing premiums, the elderly especially silently pay up. The lesser than business like approach in sourcing group/company health business adds to the woes of individual insurance buyers by jacking up premiums for them.

This is a sort of cross-subsidy: the poor forced to feed the better-off. The bargaining power and prowess of large companies/groups and brokers vitiate the situation. It is a fact that at critical stages like underwriting and claims settlement, big corporates get favoured treatment or use their clout to get it. Hope a better way of incentivising the elderly with discounts in renewal premium based on claim-free years or the like is formulated. The government can think of doing away with the tax on health insurance premiums altogether (at least for those above 45 years, where premiums start shooting up), so that more can avail of affordable cover.
Jose Abraham
Vaikom, Kerala

Boardroom blues

Fostering diversity is key to robust governance

Srinath Sridharan

Boardroom culture, shaped by various variables, plays a pivotal role in determining the ethical compass and overall effectiveness of a company's governance structure. However, achieving such a culture requires an understanding of the dynamics at play, including biases and divides within boards.

Indeed, boards are dynamic structures shaped by the individuals who comprise them and the environments in which they operate.

One of the primary variables influencing boardroom culture is the composition of the board itself. Diversity, both in terms of demographics and expertise, is often assumed to be a start of effective governance. Boards comprising individuals from diverse backgrounds bring a range of perspectives to the table, fostering robust discussions and informed decision-making processes.

However, achieving true diversity remains a challenge in many boardrooms, with issues such as gender imbalance, lack of representation from minority groups, and more so ageism persisting.

Furthermore, cognitive biases can significantly impact boardroom dynamics and decision-making processes.

Similarly, groupthink, a phenomenon characterised by the desire for consensus at the expense of critical evaluation, can stifle dissenting voices and impede effective decision-making within boards.

Moreover, the existence of divides within boards, whether stemming from ideological differences, conflicting priorities, or interpersonal tensions, can further complicate matters. Left unchecked, such divides can undermine board cohesion and diminish the effectiveness of governance mechanisms.

Skills bias within boards is a pressing issue that often results from a narrow focus on traditional qualifications and industry expertise. This bias can lead to the underrepresentation of individuals with diverse skill sets, such as those with backgrounds in technology, innovation, or social impact.

Ageism remains a pervasive issue within boardrooms, where older individuals may be favoured over younger candidates. This bias not only overlooks the potential contributions of younger generations but also perpetuates



GOVERNANCE. Diverse Boardrooms are vital. JSTOCKPHOTO

an environment of exclusion and stagnation. Embracing age diversity within boards, by actively seeking out perspectives from individuals of all age groups and fostering intergenerational collaboration, can enrich boardroom discussions and promote innovation.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that prioritises transparency, accountability, and proactive measures to mitigate biases and bridge divides within boards. Firstly, fostering an open and inclusive boardroom culture, where all voices are valued and respected, is paramount.

Encouraging constructive debate and dissent, while ensuring that decisions are grounded in rigorous analysis and ethical considerations, can help mitigate the impact of biases and promote sound decision-making.

Additionally, implementing measures to enhance board diversity and inclusion can help broaden perspectives and mitigate the influence of cognitive biases. This may involve adopting formal diversity initiatives, such as targeted recruitment strategies and board diversity quotas, as well as fostering a culture of mentorship and sponsorship to support underrepresented individuals in ascending to board positions.

Furthermore, promoting a culture of transparency and accountability, where board members are held accountable for their actions and decisions, can help mitigate the risks associated with conflicts of interest and unethical behaviour.

Within the corridors of governance, diversity is the compass guiding ethical navigation, integrity the foundation for anchoring decisions, and accountability the beacon illuminating the path to trust.

The writer is a Policy Researcher & Corporate Advisor



PARTHA RAY PARTHAPRATIM PAL

Is there something wrong with trends in Indian saving? For a country that is among one of the fastest growing big economies in the world, can the trend in savings rate (i.e., the ratio of savings to GDP at current market prices) be non-increasing?

Lately, there have been opinions and counter-opinions on the underlying numbers. While we do not believe in the dictum of Ronald H. Coase, the Nobel Laureate economist, who reportedly said, "If you torture the data long enough, it will confess to anything", we start with an eyeballing of the relevant data.

RECENT TRENDS

The official National Accounts Statistics (NAS) data show that India's Gross Domestic Saving as a percentage of GDP at current market prices came down from around 34 per cent in 2011-12 to little above 30 per cent in 2022-23.

A similar downward trend is also noticeable in the household sector (Figures 1a & 1b). The household saving rate decreased from 23.6 per cent of GDP in 2011-12 to 18.42 per cent of GDP in 2022-23. If instead of GDP, the saving rates are expressed as a percentage of Gross National Disposable Income (GNDI), the trend looks very similar. The two series are highly correlated; hence, we use GDP to calculate saving rates.

Because India is one of the leading high-growth economies in the world, do such downward trends in savings ratios pose a riddle? How does a declining trend in the savings ratio coexist with an increasing trend in the growth rate? Or, since the key to understanding the relationship between growth rate and savings ratio is the productivity of capital, does it mean the economy is becoming more and more efficient over the years so that it can grow higher with a lower savings rate?

Or, have we, as a nation, finally become believers of the philosophy of the ancient sage Charvaka, who reportedly said, "Ritam kritva ghritam pibet", literally meaning, "Drink ghee even by borrowing money"? Such questions tend to haunt the common man and policy makers alike.

Since the household sector constitutes the lion's share of household savings (figure 2), it may be worthwhile to look into further details of household saving. Some of the inferences that can be drawn from the NAS data are as follows. It should be noted that here we are discussing saving rates (components of household savings expressed as a percentage of GDP):

(a) The net household financial savings (i.e., change in financial assets minus financial liabilities) declined to 5.26 per cent of GDP in 2022-23 from 7.26 per cent in 2021-22. This has happened partly because the financial liabilities of the household sector increased dramatically from 3.81 per cent to 5.78 per cent in 2022-23. RBI Monetary Policy Report of April 2024 suggests that this increase is "for financing fixed assets/investment".

(b) This increase in financial liabilities of the household sector has happened in a regime of high inflation and high interest rates.

(c) The decline in net financial savings of the household sector is, however, associated with an increase in saving in physical assets plus gold. However, the increase in savings in physical assets has not been significant enough to offset the decline in net financial savings. To illustrate, saving in physical assets went up from 10.76 per cent of GDP in 2020-21 to 12.93 per cent of GDP in 2022-23. Saving in gold and silver went up from 0.2 per cent in 2020-21 to 0.24 per cent in 2022-23. But net financial saving of the household sector (as a percent of GDP) declined from 11.73 per cent in 2020-21 to 5.26 per cent in 2022-23 (Figure 3).

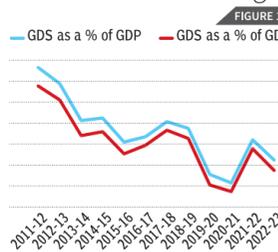
(d) Households are holding a lower percentage of their savings in currencies, while the share of bank deposits has gone up significantly in



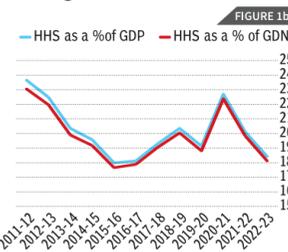
India's saving rate trend raises a few questions

MIXED TREND. Household savings in physical assets have gone up. But these have not offset the dip in household financial savings

Gross domestic savings



Savings of the household sector



Household saving as a share of gross saving (in %)



Household saving as a percentage of GDP (%)

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Household saving (1+2+3+4)	20.34	19.13	22.69	20.10	18.42
1 Gross financial saving	11.98	11.56	15.45	11.07	11.03
2 Saving in physical assets	12.22	11.2	10.76	12.58	12.93
3 Saving in form of gold & silver ornaments	0.23	0.21	0.20	0.26	0.24
4 Financial liabilities	4.08	3.85	3.71	3.81	5.78
5 Net financial saving of household sector (1-4)	7.9	7.71	11.73	7.26	5.26

Source: National Accounts Statistics, CSO

2022-23. (e) Household savings in the form of shares and debentures, including mutual funds, account for less than 1 per cent of GDP. There does not seem to be any upward trend in this pattern.

(f) The data also shows that 2020-21 is a stand-out year for financial saving. Gross and net financial savings increased to 15.45 per cent and 11.73 per

cent, respectively. These numbers are around four percentage points higher than in previous years. Conversely, savings in physical assets declined to a low of 10.76 per cent of GDP. Possibly, this has something to do with the pandemic and associated behavioural changes among economic agents.

PLURALITY OF OPINION

This topsy-turvy pattern of saving rates in India has generated a debate among economists and policymakers. While on one hand, there are views that this sharp decline in saving rate is a matter of grave concern, some others have pointed out that there has been a substitution between financial saving and physical saving, and the aggregate change in household saving rate is relatively benign.

Some other authors have used the aggregate number to suggest that household savings have increased. Here it is important to remember the distinction between the gross numbers and the rates. Especially because the data on savings are reported on a nominal basis by the NAS. And there are multiple conceptual/statistical notions of saving used — like stocks of wealth vis-à-vis flows of saving, absolute amount of saving vis-à-vis ratio of savings with respect to GDP at current market price/gross disposable income.

HOW MUCH SAVINGS DO WE NEED? There are multiple views of the necessity of savings in an economy. Particularly, it varies between the short- and long-run perspectives. In the short run, typically, savings is often seen as a leakage from the aggregate effective demand.

Thus, an increase in saving in a demand-constrained economy in the short run could lead to a paradoxical result of lower GDP. On the other hand, in the long run, saving provides surplus funds for investment, which can push up the growth rate.

Especially in a capital-scare labour surplus country like India, a higher rate of savings will be imperative for sustained long-term growth.

WAY AHEAD

Legitimately, India aspires to become a large and fast-growing economy. To achieve this, the country's savings rate needs to be further higher. Going ahead, this will be a major concern for policymakers.

Given the data, we are not entirely sure about the trend and trajectory of the Indian saving rate. Though there is an overall negative trend, it appears that the pandemic has influenced the behaviour of economic agents in India. This has also been seen in other countries where households have rebalanced their saving portfolios or have engaged in pent-up spending.

As macroeconomic data on savings are available for only a short period after the pandemic, we are yet not entirely sure if the data on household savings reflects a post-pandemic shift of economic behaviour or it reflects a genuine downward trend in the household saving rates. Policymakers should keep a close eye on this, as a high domestic saving rate will be an essential ingredient for high economic growth.

Pal is a Professor of Economics at IIM-Calcutta; and Ray is Director of the National Institute of Bank Management Pune. Views expressed are personal.

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 17, 2004

Alliance endorses Sonia for PM

It's official now. The allies of the Congress-led front on Sunday backed the Congress Parliamentary Party's decision of appointing Ms Sonia Gandhi as the Prime Minister of the country. Addressing newsmen after a two-and-a-half-hour meeting, the Congress leader, Dr Manmohan Singh, said that Ms Gandhi's name for Prime Ministership was proposed by the DMK chief, Mr M. Karunanidhi, and was seconded by the RJD President, Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav, the NCP chief, Mr Sharad Pawar, along with the other leaders present at the meeting.

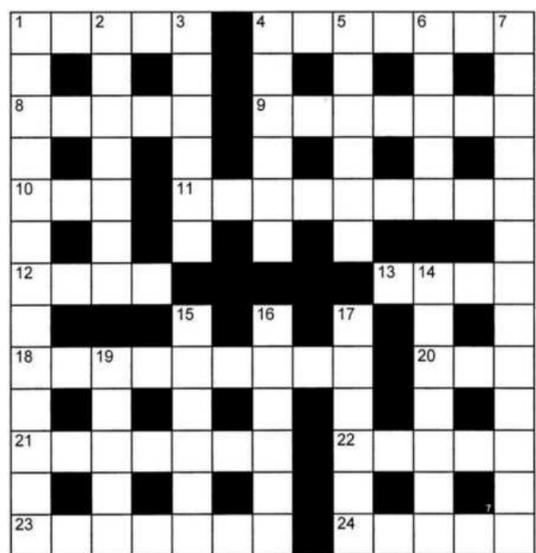
SEBI on high alert; warns of stern steps

In the backdrop of the Sensex nosedive on Friday, SEBI has asked stock exchanges to remain "extraordinarily watchful" of any unusual movements in the market. It has threatened to take stern action against any individual or entity found indulging in market misconduct and breaching rules.

BSNL set to launch broadband services

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd is in the process of developing the second phase of the National Information Backbone and expects to roll out its broadband services to both corporate and home segments in the third quarter this year.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2441



EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Steed (5)
- 04. Ursine offspring (4-3)
- 08. Control (5)
- 09. Search new ground (7)
- 10. Day preceding festival (3)
- 11. Said how it was (9)
- 12. Hop-drying kiln (4)
- 13. German housewife (4)
- 18. Testers (9)
- 20. Help (3)
- 21. Had actual being (7)
- 22. Of oriental continent (5)
- 23. Marked with geometrical forms (7)
- 24. Sloughs (5)

DOWN

- 01. Took what one wanted (6,7)
- 02. Criticisms (7)
- 03. Gained money through labour (6)
- 04. Electronic signals (6)
- 05. Seem (6)
- 06. Top of head (5)
- 07. Dessert dishes (5,8)
- 14. Turn into cash (7)
- 15. Season (6)
- 16. Made for (6)
- 17. Compositions (6)
- 19. Mimicking (5)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Drying frame right in the centre of the non-u home (5)
- 04. Ursa Minor? (4-3)
- 08. What may give one some purchase? The pound — always I (5)
- 09. Go and look for former spouse: study around London first (7)
- 10. One of the first gardeners eternally curtailed (3)
- 11. Examined how am replaced by awkward friend and made clear (9)
- 12. In which to dry malt, as in first part of Bible (4)
- 13. In Berlin, it's the wife who's responsible for a fur turn-out (4)
- 18. They test a collier involved in sex-change (9)
- 20. Rewarded monetarily but, having lost head, required assistance (3)
- 21. Were there ten I'd tees for? (7)
- 22. Easterner and Southerner in all neutral leaders (5)
- 23. Imagined it was expected to be in numbers (7)
- 24. Casts off the engine-works (5)

DOWN

- 01. Was not served, so took what one wanted (6,7)
- 02. Newspaper pieces concerned with prospects (7)
- 03. With justification got scholarly, having abandoned start (6)
- 04. Radio signals, having begun badly, disrupted sleep (6)
- 05. Seem to have a fruit quietly consumed (6)
- 06. Do some dental work off the top of one's head? (5)
- 07. Sweets produced by those who use their loaf, no doubt (5,8)
- 14. Come to see what's genuine is energy (7)
- 15. When it's cold between, the West will initiate it (6)
- 16. Struck the ball when one was at the top (6)
- 17. Tries such things as Lamb wrote (6)
- 19. A sound from a timer is being imitative (5)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2440

ACROSS 1. Picturesque 8. Leech 9. Precede 10. Veteran 11. Lover 12. Resign 14. Edible 18. Delta 19. Situate 21. Rossini 23. Omaha 24. Darning-wool
DOWN 1. Palaver 2. Creates 3. Usher 4. Expend 5. Quelled 6. Ewe 7. Cheer 13. Glazier 15. Bravo 16. Eyeball 17. Assisi 18. Dirge 20. Thong 22. Sad

Rules of the game

Exceptions for PSEs should be avoided

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India on Wednesday informed stock exchanges the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) had given it a three-year extension to comply with the mandatory 10 per cent public-shareholding norm. It can now attain the mandatory 10 per cent public float by May 16, 2027. Firms with a market capitalisation above ₹1 trillion are expected to attain 25 per cent public shareholding in five years. However, in the case of LIC, it has already been extended to 10 years. While the LIC stock reacted positively to the extension announcement, it should have been avoided. Such regulatory forbearance affects the credibility of institutions in the market.

One of the big weaknesses of the Indian policy establishment in the post-reform period has been its inability to sustain even good initiatives. The disinvestment programme is one such example. The basic idea was stake sale or outright privatisation of public-sector enterprises (PSEs) would improve the performance of such entities and also help the government raise resources. The public-shareholding norms of Sebi were intended to increase the public float of listed companies to enable market liquidity and better price discovery. However, in the case of LIC both the principles of disinvestment and public shareholding have been diluted. LIC was listed two years ago in May 2022 with a public float of just 3.5 per cent. The government was expected to sell its stake subsequently to achieve the stated listing norms. However, it has not happened thus far.

One reason for the government's reluctance could be the performance of the LIC stock. After being issued at ₹949, the share price slipped below ₹540 in March 2023. Thus, a follow-on public offer would have fetched a much lower price. In fact, the stock price could have corrected further in anticipation of an increased supply of shares in the market. But this may also mean that the initial issue got more favourable pricing. Since the stock price recovered after the shock, the government could have sold its stake to comply with the public-shareholding norms. Given the LIC's full market capitalisation of over ₹6 trillion, the government would have raised a significant amount to push its capital expenditure programme and reduce the fiscal deficit. But this was not done.

However, irrespective of the price correction and possible political compulsion, events like these set avoidable precedents. It is worth noting that LIC is not an isolated case. The market data shows that there are more than 20 listed entities, including public-sector banks, where the government shareholding is above 75 per cent. In fact, it is 90 per cent or more in 12 companies. From a purely economic standpoint, it is puzzling that when the government is running a high fiscal deficit and aims to boost capital expenditure, it is not enthusiastically pursuing disinvestment. Since stock markets have also been supportive in recent times, selling stakes in PSEs to just comply with public shareholding norms would have given the government a significant amount of resources. More importantly, it would have avoided the need to make exceptions for PSEs.

Rapid AI transition

ChatGPT's new version raises old questions

Nearly 18 months after OpenAI launched its artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, ChatGPT, the Microsoft-backed company has launched its latest large language model (LLM) called GPT-4o. In doing so, OpenAI reaffirms its dominant position globally in the AI space. However, other tech giants like Meta and Google are not far behind. Google, for example, has started powering its search engine with AI Overviews. The main point of departure between GPT-4o and previous versions of ChatGPT lies in its ease of interaction. ChatGPT was primarily a text-based LLM interface where users could type text-based questions and wait for text-based responses. Besides, ChatGPT-4 was only available to paid subscribers. GPT-4o, in contrast, is free, easier to use, and is able to mimic human interaction in real time. It is also a multimodal AI model — integrating audio, speech, vision, and text with minimal time lag, enabling verbal communications with a chatbot that convincingly speaks like a human.

Further, it is capable of translating text, identifying emotion and tone in users' speech, solving mathematical equations and much more, making it uncannily human-like. The latest technological development augurs well for both OpenAI and its investors like Microsoft. Currently valued at more than \$80 billion, OpenAI's valuation has tripled in less than 10 months. Even though AI-led disruption is already evident in labour markets across the world, it remains to be seen whether generative AI models and LLM interface adoption will have a net positive effect on labour market outcomes in the medium term. AI-induced automation not only promises higher productivity and standard of living, it evokes fear of job displacement, increasing unemployment, and deepening poverty. The impact of AI is also likely to differ significantly across countries. Developing countries like India, relying on labour-intensive employment, are expected to face less AI-led disruption. At the same time, they may find it difficult to catch up with early AI-driven productivity gains, given their infrastructure deficit and lack of a skilled workforce. The 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report, recently released by Microsoft and LinkedIn, reveals a striking increase in AI utilisation in the workplace globally, with its use nearly doubling in the past six months. Around 75 per cent of respondents reported that AI performed most of the mundane tasks, thereby saving time, boosting creativity, and allowing them to focus on more important work.

At the same time, concerns regarding the skills gap in terms of AI literacy, the possibility of occupational layoffs, inadequate resources for the reskilling and upskilling of workers, the spread of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and cybersecurity risks remain critical from a policy standpoint. The rapid pace of AI evolution can result in disruption at many levels. While firms and individuals are adopting AI at a rapid pace, the productivity boost could be at the cost of human employment, at least in the initial stage. It's not clear at this stage how the policy establishment in India and around the world will deal with such potential challenges. But that's not the only challenge. The creation and dissemination of information and opinions are evolving in ways that were not known until recently and will have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, given the backdrop, while India must actively pursue productivity gains, it's vital for the policy establishment to remain vigilant.

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Regulatory fee or unjust enrichment?

Regulators are empowered to levy fees for services rendered, not to impose tax-like levies to create surpluses for themselves

In an exchange filing recently, BSE stated that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has asked it to pay the regulatory fee on the annual turnover, considering the "notional value" in the case of options contracts. The communication from Sebi further advised BSE to pay this amount retrospectively, i.e., from the financial year (FY) 2006-07, with 15 per cent interest per annum. The amount is expected to be close to ₹70 crore. Financial and fiscal experts find this odd and wrong.

How does a regulator get resourced? One of the reasons why we have regulators is the desire to distance them from the fray of politics and the elected government. This domain autonomy, in turn, requires financial autonomy. Arm's length regulators should not be dependent on the government for their spending, as this could undermine their independence. The regulator may feel pressured to align its decisions with the interests of the people controlling its purse strings. Even if the regulator maintains formal independence in its decision-making processes, financial dependence can create a perception of bias in the eyes of stakeholders. One of the reasons to have an independent regulator is to persuade private investors that there is a predictable rule-of-law environment. Hence, it is essential to establish mechanisms that achieve adequate and secure funding for regulators. This has been done through the power to charge fees.

The single big idea of public policy is that every power of a state organisation must be surrounded by an elaborate system of checks and balances. In India,

regulators have had the power to impose fees without commensurate checks and balances. As a consequence, we have seen episodes of self-aggrandising behaviour. There is a propensity to levy high fees, support expansive expenditure programmes, and amass pools of assets. The inexplicable events around the charges placed upon BSE are part of this larger pattern.

As an example, in the last five financial years, Sebi has reported a large and growing surplus of income over expenditure (including capital expenditure). Of its total income of ₹1,404 crore in 2022-23, around 86 per cent was generated through the fees/subscriptions it charges from entities. It generated an income not only sufficient to perform and fulfil its regulatory duties but also large enough to be in surplus of more than ₹500 crore in this FY. In fact, it ended the FY with a closing balance of ₹4,508 crore. The surplus has been approximately ₹484 crore in FY22, ₹158 crore in FY21, ₹225 crore in FY20, and ₹471 crore in FY19. Sebi's income and profits are now larger than those of many financial firms.

How can we do things better? What is the design to ensure autonomy without empire building by regulators? 1. Indian courts have repeatedly ruled on the distinction between taxes and fees levied by public authorities. A tax is a compulsory extraction of money by a public authority for public purposes enforceable by law, whereas fees are payment for services rendered. In fees, there is an element of quid pro quo between the individual payer and the public authority, which is absent in a tax. Bodies like Sebi are authorised to only levy fees which have relation to the service rendered. This implies that ad valorem charges



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM

K P KRISHNAN

Measuring up to the standard

In an era when rapid technological advancement fuels economic growth, the landscape of standards-making and governance has undergone a significant transformation. Each new technological innovation necessitates standardisation for widespread global adoption. However, the pace of adoption, particularly in innovative digital technologies, often outstrips the traditional standard development processes, leading to emergence of de facto standards, such as the Windows operating system or the Intel CPU architecture.

The rapid technological evolution has reshaped the landscape of global standardisation bodies. Traditional entities like the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which were heavily influenced by national governments, have been supplanted by industry-led organisations tailored for specific sectors. For example, internet-related standards are now primarily shaped by the industry-led Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and non-profit ICANN, among others. Similarly, the 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) has become the key arbiter of telecommunications standards. This shift towards specialised bodies allows for more agile responses to the unique demands of the rapidly evolving industries. Companies at the forefront of technology development dominate these standard-making bodies, standardising patented innovations into standard essential patents (SEPs), generating substantial wealth. For example, the 3G technology alone resulted in over 23,000 SEPs, yielding hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue.

Standards have become critical in international trade after import tariffs were reduced following the Uruguay Round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations. Some governments employ standards, or technical regulations, to control imports, mandating local testing and certification, or using other ways of raising costs, thus hindering market access. Despite WTO's Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement aiming to mitigate such barriers, weak enforcement limits its efficacy. Consequently, standards now hold not only technical relevance but also geopolitical and strategic value, prompting nations to vie for influence in global standard-making bodies.

India's track record in standards management has been mixed. The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) Act, 1986, was expected to create a world-class standards governance in the country by providing a centralised statutory framework for formulating and enforcing standards across all sectors. However, shortcomings emerged in both standard formulation and standard enforcement. India struggled to create an ecosystem where domestic innovations could lead to the development of national, let alone global, standards. Though BIS formulated over 20,000 Indian standards, these were largely adaptations of global standards.

It failed to formulate standards for technological innovations like laminate poly-packs pioneered by Tata Tea, software products like Tally or Finale, or traditional Indian practices like water-harvesting and below-sea-level farming. These highlight a missed opportunity to incentivise Indian innovation through standardisation. BIS also struggled to get Indian standards adopted within industry and governments. Despite their availability, many government tenders still referenced global standards, as Indian standards weren't obligatory. Under the BIS Act, mandating an Indian standard required obtaining a licence, burdened with regulatory control and inspector-raj issues, leading to resistance from industry. Consequently, by 2013, only a few Indian standards were mandated, while global standards remained popular in the Indian market, disadvantaging Indian manufacturers, while foreign companies easily accessed the Indian market.

In 2013, India witnessed a ground-breaking breakthrough. Faced with the surge of sub-standard and unsafe Chinese electronic goods, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) issued a compulsory registration order, mandating safety standards for laptops, desktops, mobile phones, microwave ovens, and other electronic goods. This marked the first occasion when a technical regulation under the BIS Act got widespread adoption in India since it introduced a self-registration scheme that replaced the burdensome licence-based system. Manufacturers underwent testing and certification by accredited labs, after which BIS granted them registration for sales in India. Remarkably, within months, the scheme garnered over 90 per cent adoption. The introduction of the scheme itself was incredible to most because the extant BIS Act only provided

are inappropriate: The fees charged by Sebi to any one organisation (such as BSE) should be connected to the cost incurred at Sebi in regulating BSE.

This is not a new issue. Many years ago, Sebi proposed increasing the ad valorem fee for renewal of the annual registration of some regulated entities. Questions were raised in the Sebi Board on this and the nexus between the fee and the service rendered by Sebi. Sebi was forced to reduce the fee, and since then, Sebi has moved away from an ad valorem fee to a fixed fee for most such registrations and renewals. 2. A government organisation that charges high fees and amasses a large corpus is probably also a government organisation that spends too much. Greater care needs to be taken in establishing the spending envelope of these organisations. A Sebi that has a lower resource envelope will be more selective in choosing important regulation making and supervision projects.

3. The place where all these issues come together is the board of the organisation. Modern thinking on regulation has emphasised the importance of the role and composition of the board. The board of every organisation is about protecting the interests of the ultimate stakeholders against the self-interest of the full time staff of the organisation. The board must apply constitutional principles and block ad-valorem fees. The board must push asset pools out of the organisation up to the Ministry of Finance. The board must run a budget process each year, where cost control is implemented, and where the managers are held accountable to deliver improvements in the working of the organisation in return for increases in the budget.

4. It is unwise for Indian public finance to have multiple treasuries all over the Indian government landscape. Hence, the parliament amended the Sebi Act through the Finance Act, 2019, for transfer of the surplus. Oddly, after this amendment was passed by Parliament and approved by the President, it has not been notified. Sebi has remitted about ₹1,000 crore to the Consolidated Fund of India, but the Sebi Act amendment has been put into cold storage.

5. The energy and human talent available to engage in these questions is limited. It is difficult to solve these problems separately for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Sebi, or others. Ensuring financial propriety and extracting pools of cash that have built up at the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority, RBI, Sebi, and other such regulators has consumed many years of effort by India's scarce public policy resources. It is better to use the approach of the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission, where the idea is to have a single parliamentary law that sets forth the correct framework to shape the workings of all financial agencies.

The writer is an honorary senior fellow at the Isaac Centre for Public Policy, and a former civil servant



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR

Love and loss in Palestine



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

Israel has been plundering Palestinian land for aeons. Since October 7, 2023, in which Hamas—a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group, which is also considered a terrorist group—attacked Israeli communities along Israel's southern fence with Gaza, killing at least 1,139 people and taking 252 hostages, Israel's counter reaction has been disproportionate. As of May 14, 2024, more than 35,000 people have been killed, the United Nations (UN) says half a million Gazans have been forced to flee and 80 per cent of healthcare centres in Gaza have been destroyed. Yet when student organisations in

the US and Europe are organising protests and raising slogans to "Free Palestine", they are labelled "anti-Semitic", particularly by allies of the Israeli state. This ugly aspect is reflected in two confusing literary occurrences. First, a giant literary figure's loosely argued, unconvincing two-sidedism. Yes, I'm referring to Zadie Smith's *New Yorker* essay "War in Gaza, Shabbolets on Campus" (May 5). Second, the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting was awarded to the staff of *The New York Times* for their "wide-ranging and revelatory coverage of Hamas' lethal attack in southern Israel on October 7, Israel's intelligence failures and the Israeli military's sweeping, deadly response in Gaza."

Since Mr Smith and NYT refuse to call a genocide a genocide, it's best to turn to the interesting choice on the part of the Pulitzer Prize committee to award in the General Non-Fiction category Jerusalem-based Jewish journalist Nathan Thrall, author of *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*.

A Palestine Story. In the US edition, published by Metropolitan Books, the subtitle was different though: *Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy*, making one wonder if the mention of Palestine in the subtitle would have invited resistance.

Mr Thrall writes that this book was born out of an article he wrote for *The New York Review of Books* with the same title. It was a report on Dahiyat-a-Salaam-based Abed Salama's search for his five-year-old son who was on a picnic-bound bus that met with an accident. Had Israel not created obscure entry-exit rules for Palestinians in the region and had their rescue teams been deployed in a timely manner, the children who died in the bus that caught fire could have been saved.

Mr Thrall's reporting reads like fiction, for it has all the elements of an intergenerational saga set against the backdrop of the Palestinian people's struggle to claim their land. The book effectively draws a parallel between Salama's life and the shifting political gears in political history.

In the Prologue, for instance, the author notes that when Salama heard of the accident and that children's burned bodies were being identified, he, shockingly, first thought of his ex-wife: "Am I being punished for what I did to Asmahan?" Salama had married Asmahan in 1993 after a fallout with the love of his life, Ghazl. That was the year

"Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords, which brought an end to the intifada and led to the formation of the Palestinian Authority, the *sulta*, with its limited self-governing powers in the most heavily populated pockets of Gaza and the West Bank."

Compromise rarely leads to an assured future, however. Salama couldn't find happiness in his marital life and the couple eventually separated. Later, Salama married Haifa. It was their son, Milad Salama, who died in the accident.

How is all this linked to Israeli control, you may ask? There's a colour-

coded Israeli ID system that divides Palestinians. It came in response to the Second Intifada and the creation of a separation barrier—a wall, the construction of which was the largest infrastructure project in Israel's history. Its architect, Dany Tirza's story is featured in the book. The wall isolates East Jerusalem from the West, making it

impossible for Palestinians to access certain parts of the geography without a permit. These connections with how Israeli occupation impacts everyday lives helps Mr Thrall's reportage go beyond the personal story. Huda

Dahbour, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) doctor, who is introduced to the reader in the second part, exemplifies this. Ms Dahbour worked for UNRWA's Jerusalem headquarters in Sheikh Jarrah until Israel made it impossible for her to enter the city. Now

she treats patients in a mobile clinic in the West Bank." Her team helped rescue a dozen children in the accident.

Engrossing and thought-provoking, this book was a result of Mr Thrall's engagement with the story for over three years. But one doesn't need that much time to realise what's happening in Palestine. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé notes in "The Futility and Immorality of Partition in Palestine" in *On Palestine* (Penguin, 2015), co-authored with Noam Chomsky, "Zionism has done, and continues to do, whatever it can to divide the Palestinian people and guide all of them to a dead end."

Will stakeholders in this long-running tragedy rely on Mr Smith's unscrupulous use of language that transfers power to the oppressor? Or will they acknowledge Palestinian's resilience and mobilisation in the face of unrelenting tragedy—of which Mr Thrall's book is but a sneak peek? The answer will certainly determine the trajectory of human rights in the decades to come.

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The consensus in US on China

By raising the tariffs on Chinese products, the Biden regime builds on the Trump legacy

In a starkly divided America, Democrats and Republicans agree and act together on one subject — the need to compete with China. Their political argument is not about the desirability of this competition but projecting one's own party as stronger and more effective against China. And few issues illustrate it more clearly than trade.

As President, Donald Trump made the trade deficit with China a way of aggregating the discontent of the American working class that had lost out due to the shift in manufacturing to China. He then initiated what was billed as a trade war with China by imposing stiff tariffs, even as the intricate and deep economic interdependencies between the two countries have remained. This week, President Joe Biden doubled down on that approach, imposing and increasing tariffs on the import of steel and aluminium, electric vehicles and batteries, solar cells and semiconductors, medical devices and more from China. The move is both an electoral signal to American businesses and workers that the Biden administration is committed to its interests and a strategic and commercial signal that the US will do what it can to prevent China from controlling the critical green sectors of the future. Trump, meanwhile, has promised that if re-elected, he will impose a 10% tariff across the board, with a higher tariff on Chinese imports and a four-year plan to eliminate them altogether in essential goods.

Both leaders differ on the nature, scale and pace of the tariffs and see the other as weak or reckless. The Democrats and the Republicans differ on the endgame of the broader US-China competition or even the definition of victory. But the competitiveness over who is more of a hawk on China on trade reveals a fundamental political consensus around the idea that the US must urgently reduce its dependence on China across sectors; it must bring back industry to America through higher tariffs; and it must have its own industrial policy in critical tech and green sectors.

The US and China talk, as they should. Indeed, just as Biden was announcing his tariffs, top tech policy officials from both sides were meeting in Geneva to discuss Artificial Intelligence safety. And the two countries will have moments of enhanced engagement and efforts to prevent an outright conflict. But they are competing vigorously in domains as varied as defence and strategy and economy and trade and cyber and space. This mix of continued adversarial US-China ties, with a degree of engagement, suits India just fine as Delhi leverages global fault lines to build its own capabilities.

What high turnout in Srinagar polls means

The high turnout in Jammu and Kashmir's Srinagar constituency is significant and carries a message for the Centre. The 36% turnout in J&K's capital for the Lok Sabha elections is the highest since 1996, when 41% polling was reported: In the 2019 general elections, polling was as low as 14.4%. With similar turnout expected in Anantnag-Rajouri and Baramulla constituencies, scheduled to vote in the coming phases, expectations are that the turnout in the six constituencies of J&K will cross 50%. Significantly, no outfit had called for a poll boycott and no untoward incident was reported from Srinagar on polling day.

The message in the peaceful polling and high turnout point to a groundswell for representative democracy. J&K has been under central rule since the abrogation of Article 370 in August 2019. Normal political activities were suspended following a large number of arrests of leaders and cadres of various parties.

However, elections to the District Development Councils in 2020 saw a revival of politics at the grassroots. The recent statement from Jamaat-e-Islami, an influential voice in electoral politics until the 1990s insurgency, that it would contest polls if the ban on the outfit was lifted — the pro-Pakistan group was proscribed in August 2019 — points to a churn even in the separatist quarter.

The Centre must build on this sentiment for political agency and pursue restoration of statehood for the region and subsequently hold elections to the legislative assembly. A return to politics at the grassroots is likely to be a raucous affair, but that noise is born out of a democratic impulse to engage in public affairs, which is welcome. It is also essential to address bread-and-butter issues and will augment the gains made in sectors such as tourism.

{ BEYOND THE BYTE }

Rajdeep Sardesai



M factor in the polls is the mahila voter

This general elections is likely to be won and lost by the biggest vote bank of them all, women, who constitute nearly half of the electorate

In the battle for 2024, the M factor has taken centre stage. Modi, Muslims, *Mangalsutra* (Hindu marital marker), and even *mun* and *machhli* (fish) have become part of the election lexicon. While the Opposition may blame media, marketing and money (three more Ms) for their predicament, the truth is only one M may prove decisive this time: Never before in Indian electoral history has the *mahila* (woman) vote mattered more. It is this crucial "power of 49" vote bank that gives Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a big advantage in a seemingly "wave-less" election that is still heavily weighted in favour of the incumbent.

Let's do the maths first. It was in 2019 that the women voter turnout exceeded that of men for the first time, albeit by a small fraction: 67.18% to 67.02%. This election, there is a 7.5% increase in registered women voters, higher than the five per cent for men. As many as 471 million

women are registered voters now and in 12 states the gender ratio is in favour of women compared to eight in 2019. An Axis My India poll survey in 2019 shows that 46% of women voted for the BJP compared to 44% of men. Significantly, a 2019 study by Lokniti-CSDS showed that 59% of women are now making their own voting decisions, independent of male members in the family, a sure sign of female emancipation.

The ascent of the "she" voter is not just a post-2014 phenomenon. Jayalalithaa, for example, was able to buck anti-incumbency in Tamil Nadu by consciously focusing on the woman voter with an array of welfare measures targeted towards them. Nitish Kumar in Bihar conquered Lalu Prasad's caste arithmetic by not just wooing the Extremely Backward Castes but also by creating a distinct vote bank among women: Bihar in 2006 became the first state in the country where women were given 50% reservations in local bodies and *panchayats*. In West Bengal, if Mamata Banerjee was able to keep the BJP at bay in 2021, it was largely because of her successful women-centric schemes like *Kanyashree*. If the BJP retained Madhya Pradesh and won back Chhattisgarh last year, Ladli Behna and Mahtari Vandana — both aimed at ensuring direct cash benefits to women — were a key factor. And if the Congress won Karnataka last year,

its "guarantees" including Gruha Lakshmi, which provides ₹2,000 per month to women heads of family and Shakti, which provides free travel to women in state-run buses, had a major role to play.

Narendra Modi too has embraced the woman voter but only scaled up the outreach. Be it Ujjwala Yojana, Jan Dhan Yojana, Aawas Yojana or the more recent Lakhpati Didi Yojana, the schemes are designed to give women a sense of social and economic empowerment. Not all the projects have been uniformly successful: the Ujjwala scheme, which aims to make LPG gas cylinders available to rural and poor households, has seen a poor refill rate largely because of a spike in LPG prices. But the intent is clear: Women must see themselves as prime *labharthis* or beneficiaries of the Modi government's welfare interventions.

Which raises the question: Who really is the woman voter and what motivates her to vote for a specific party or leader? While broad generalisations in a diverse country are fraught with risk, a definite pattern is emerging where low-income women voters in particular appear squarely focused on twin challenges — livelihood and security. An aspirational urban woman is fighting for identity and equality, her rural counterpart's needs are more basic.

In our travels across the country, we heard many poor women com-



The ascent of the "she" voter is not just a post-2014 phenomenon

plaint of the other big M, *mehngai* (inflation). But they cushion their anger by admitting that five kilos of free food grains per month is a huge relief. It is almost as if free *rashan* (ration) is offsetting growing disillusionment with their economic condition. In Maharashtra, for example, where agrarian distress is acute, free ration is seen as a saviour in rural households. In Uttar Pradesh, an improved law and order situation is the chief reason for Yogi Adityanath's popularity among women voters. In Bengal, Sandeshkhali has pushed the Mamta government onto the backfoot but the Lakshmi Bhandar scheme of financial independence for women might soften the blow. In Andhra Pradesh, Jagan Mohan Reddy's cash transfer programmes for women are his best hope to combat anti-incumbency against his government.

On a pan-India level though, Modi still is ahead on gender ratings. While the Prajwal Revanna and Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh episodes have exposed the hollowness of Nari Shakti and Beti Padhao, Beti Bachao sloganising, they have not dented Brand Modi yet. The "alpha male" image of a self-styled macho leader who embodies the idea of a strong government is appealing to many women voters. By

contrast, Rahul Gandhi's comparatively softer image and more compassionate "*mohabbat-ki-dukkan*" vocabulary need to be shored up by visible action on the ground. The Congress's Mahalakshmi scheme that promises ₹1 lakh every year to a woman from a poor family is a potential game changer if backed by effective communication and delivery. In most places we travelled to, everyone had heard of Modi ki Guarantee, but very few were aware of the Congress's promises to women voters.

Which is why when votes are finally counted on June 4 and television studios furiously debate caste and community equations, remember the elections will actually be won and lost by the biggest vote bank of them all — the Indian *mahila* voter.

Post-script: In a village near Ayodhya, we met a group of devout women. They were delighted with the inauguration of the Ram Mandir but when asked what issue they would vote on, they replied pointedly, "Ram se pet to nahi bharta. Pehle rashan, phir Ram." (Ram does not fill stomachs. First ration, then Ram)

Rajdeep Sardesai is a senior journalist and author. The views expressed are personal

Why Chabahar port is a big deal for India, Iran

The borders of undivided India touched Afghanistan and Central Asia. This contiguity was lost with Partition. While it is difficult to redraw the map, Chabahar port could provide access to our hinterland. On Monday, the minister for shipping, inland waterways Sarbananda Sonowal was in Chabahar to witness the signing of a 10-year long-term contract, which renewed India's commitment to developing the port in Iran. It may be recalled that the first 10-year contract was signed during Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's visit to Iran in 2016.

Chabahar port has a chequered history. During the Shah's time, Iran had offered this port to the Americans. The Shah also planned to build a submarine base in Chabahar. The port is outside the Hormuz Strait and could provide a safe alternative in case of a conflagration in the Gulf. This is a major advantage from Iran's perspective. From India's point of view, Chabahar is an attractive proposition as it is closer to home than Bandar Abbas.

Chabahar has two ports — Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti. The Indian project scope involves the development of the latter. During my first visit to Chabahar, I was struck to see how developed the city was. The Iranian government had lavished expenditure on infrastructure in and around Chabahar. The port town is linked by road to Zahedan and Mashhad in the north as well as Bandar Abbas in the west. It lacks rail connectivity, though reportedly the Iranian side has made progress in doing the groundwork.

Chabahar port was offered to the Indian side during Iranian President Muahmmad Khatami's visit to India in 2002. The project, however, remained on the back burner for almost a decade. I had the privilege of starting negotiations with Tehran in 2012 as then Indian ambassador to Iran. This culminated in an MoU signed during the visit of then minister for shipping, Nitin Gadkari, in May 2015. This was followed by the contract signed in the presence of PM Modi the next year. As that agreement could not be operationalised for various reasons, the project was so far being run on the basis of an annually renewed interim contract. This will now be replaced by a new 10-year agreement.

The geopolitical situation in the region has changed from what it was in 2015. The United States (US) has exited Afghanistan. Kabul has a Taliban regime. Islamabad has had four governments since 2021 — Imran Khan, Shahbaz Sharif, interim government and now, Shahbaz Sharif again. Does this change the relevance of Chabahar for India? Regardless of change in governments, geography remains an immutable factor. Pakistan extracted a rent for allowing transit to Afghanistan through Karachi port. In the case of America, this was in the form of a coalition support

CHABAHAR PORT WAS OFFERED TO THE INDIAN SIDE DURING IRANIAN PRESIDENT MUAHMED KHATAMI'S VISIT TO INDIA IN 2002.

fund and various aid packages. Afghanistan suffered long delays and pilferage of goods during transit. India was allowed transit sporadically. If Pakistan did not allow transit rights in the past, it is unlikely to do it now when it has a deeply fractured polity and a sinking economy. There will be no appetite for making a major political gesture to India by allowing transit rights. India needs Chabahar regardless of changes in regimes in the neighbourhood.

India's engagement with the Central Asian republics has increased. Trade with Central Asia also requires a transit route. While Chabahar is important for India, it also broadens the options of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. At present, Afghanistan trade depends on Karachi or Bandar Abbas port.

The former option does not exist with strained relations between the Taliban and Islamabad. The situation has worsened especially after Pakistani strikes on targets within Afghanistan. Bandar Abbas, Iran's main port, is congested.

The Chabahar port will need a railway link to connect it to Zahedan and Sarakhs in the north. Sarakhs in the northeast corner of Iran is located at the tri-junction of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. It is connected by rail to Turkmenistan, which has connectivity with other Central Asian republics. Once a railway line is built to Sarakhs, Chabahar will be connected to Central Asia.

Chabahar port could also be a hub for trans-shipment to Africa. At present, Indian exports are trans-shipped via Jebel Ali. But this will require improving the port infrastructure. An immediate requirement would be establishing a direct shipping line between Indian ports and Chabahar. Without a regular shipping service, it is difficult to attract traffic to the port. Chabahar is often compared with Gwadar. There is a fundamental difference between the two. Gwadar has been developed by China as a naval base. The Indian project in Chabahar is a civilian project. The port will be open for business with third countries also. There are already Chinese companies present in the Chabahar Free Trade Zone. Pakistan and China do not look kindly at India's Chabahar presence.

A new factor in the equation is tensions in West Asia, though the Indian project scope in Chabahar is limited to connectivity with Afghanistan. After the recent exchanges between Iran and Israel, US sanctions against Iran have deepened. There was a sharp warning by the US State Department following President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Pakistan in April. The US spokesman said that anybody doing business with Iran will be sanctioned after the decision by Tehran and Islamabad to increase bilateral trade to \$10 billion and resume work on the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. The State Department spokesperson reiterated the same line on Monday when asked about the Chabahar agreement. He added there was no exemption from sanctions for Chabahar. External affairs minister S Jaishankar described it as a bilateral matter between India and Iran.

DP Srivastava, a former ambassador to Iran, served on the board of India Ports Global Ltd. for five years. The views expressed are personal

{ VLADIMIR PUTIN } RUSSIAN PRESIDENT

Relations between Russia and China are not opportunistic and not directed against anyone. Together, we uphold the principles of justice and a democratic world order



Missing in manifestos, campaigns: Land rights

Over the past few months, as election fever gripped the nation, there have been two significant movements to highlight land issues. One has been that of the massive and well-organised protest followed by a relay hunger strike, led by Sonam Wangchuk, for Ladakh to have eco-sensitive land policies and for its Sixth Schedule status to be restored. The other has been the less visible but persistent and peaceful protest, including a threat to boycott the elections, by farmers of 13 villages around Devanahalli near the Bengaluru International Airport, for the government to rescind the notification to acquire 1,777 acres of land to set up a new SEZ. In these and many other contexts, land, its allocation, rights of communities, and rights of farmers have become central issues. Yet, in the manifestos of the major political parties — or campaigns — there is little mention of these issues or an attempt to address policies related to land.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s manifesto makes no mention of the Land Acquisition Rehabilitation and Resettlement (LARR) Act but states that the party will facilitate real estate growth by assuring speed and ease of completion under the Real Estate Regulation Act (RERA) if it comes to power. The Congress manifesto flags concern over the rise of the "billionaire raj", but reduces land issues to merely establishing "an authority to monitor the distribution to the poor of government land and surplus land under the land ceiling Acts" and indicates that it will retain the rights of *gram panchayats* to have veto power in deciding land issues under the LARR Act.

The manifesto of the Communist Party of India-Marxist, or CPI(M) claims to ensure the reversal or the dilution of land ceiling laws, implement land reform, provide joint titles to women, retain the original definition of "public purpose" in the LARR Act, and to establish land tribunals to expedite resolutions to land related legal issues. But, the CPI(M)'s recent record on land rights and issues is far from heartening as its actions in Singur and Nandigram in West Bengal and its backing for the Adani-built Vizhinjam port near Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, reveal.

Issues of access to land, rights of communities, region-specific policies, use of land, etc, have marked the political economy of central India, especially in the *adivasi* belts of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, and in Kashmir, Ladakh,

and much of the North East, including Manipur. Since 2014, there has been a dilution of the LARR Act and the subsequent unleashing of a violent extractive economy in much of India. Similarly, facilitating dilution and abrogating land ceiling laws, especially in the context of agricultural land has enabled the growth of a speculative economy in land which as a source of accumulation and a form of real estate has become the bedrock of unplanned and iniquitous urban growth. Since the past decade, there has been the twining of this speculative economy in land with political positions so much so that regional politicians draw not only on their caste positions but deploy political power to acquire and accumulate large tracts of land and then foray into interlinked businesses of real estate, construction, hospitality and education institutions, including universities, to emerge as formidable regional satraps. This combining of political prowess and business interests also enables politicians to retain political power over several years and elections and to pass on their business and political interests to their families.

Since land has become the key source of assets and capital accumulation, issues related to regulating its use, access and distribution are not key to the orientation of most political parties and elected representatives. The political-economic dispensation across the board is now one in which citizens' rights to land, livelihood and life worlds get compromised for purposes of investment, profits, and employment generation. All political parties seek to avoid responding to or engaging with the key demands of the movements in Ladakh or in Karnataka's Devanahalli regions. How should political parties stand by their promises of enabling the rights of citizens over pressures exerted by corporate groups? How can the administration of land ensure ecological sustainability while also facilitating economic growth and social justice? None of these questions are sought to be answered in the election manifestos or campaigns.

Instead, the platitudes in these manifestos are mere statements that ring hollow. They signal neither concern nor commitment to any agenda that can address the dire need to make land and its use sustainable, just and viable.

AR Vasavi is a social anthropologist based in Karnataka. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



Spoof on Kellogg: Brand theft or publicity stunt?

Jerry Seinfeld's new comedy film makes brazen fun of a corporate rivalry even as he dares brand owners to sue. But the latter would rather join the joke. What's going on? Don't ask AI

A minor buzz arose this week over the major issue of whether AI chatbots had evolved a sense of humour. Maybe we'll know once AI bots get to have the last laugh. For now, another vital question should strike us: Have corporations evolved one? The ribs they tickle are usually by the ad agencies they hire. A test case popped into view this month with the Netflix release of comedian Jerry Seinfeld's *Unfrosted*, a spoof on Kellogg-versus-Post rivalry over breakfast cereals and other satisfiers of taste-buds in America. In telling its tale—as told to a kid, cleverly—of the amazing success of Kellogg's Pop-Tarts, this movie gleefully uses the company's brands and mascots to make bellies wobble with laughter for a change. It tells us about this hot innovation of a flat pastry that pops out of a toaster with such wry distortion that one would have to be an AI bot to take it for real. Still, such creative liberty is rarely taken by filmmakers in India. Rajesh Krishnan's comedy *Crew*, for example, tactfully uses Kohinoor Airlines as a stand-in for Kingfisher, though with winks and nudges thrown in (like a fictional owner called Vijay Walia). Spoofing a company has long been taboo in showbiz for an obvious reason: There may be legal hell to pay for brand theft, etc. But what's going on in America? Have businesses begun to see the funny side of what they do? Seinfeld's latest film did not pioneer this new genre of brand parodies. Just last year, movie halls were left in splits by Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, which got laughs at this doll's expense. This film had the approval of the brand's owner Mattel, though, and might even have served as a subtle ad. According to Seinfeld, *Unfrosted* is "the opposite." In his words from a recent interview:

"*Barbie* is made by Mattel. Kellogg had no idea and would never allow us to do anything like this. And if we don't get sued, it'll be a miracle. We thought that'd be phenomenal publicity, if we do get sued. I mean, walking in court with lawyers to defend myself that I made fun of the Pop-Tart in a way that's inappropriate... I'd love that trial." Adding a dash of intrigue to the film's context, Kellogg in the US split last October into Kellanova and W.K. Kellogg Company. The former put out a statement calling the movie "farce not fact," adding for good measure that it's "a fictional account of Pop-Tarts' history and is meant for entertainment purposes." Seinfeld would probably be disposed to agree. Asked about the research that went into the movie, he replied, "There was no desire to get anything right, we just wanted to make it."

So, did Seinfeld get away with brand infringement? This is where the plot thickens. Pleased by the buzz, perhaps, Pop-Tarts' owner Kellanova leapt to join the joke. It ran a spoofy two-minute video of its own to wag a finger at Seinfeld for brand theft as funnily as it could. It even launched limited-pack Tart-Pops, picking up the movie's version of why it sold like hot cakes: The clunky name Trat-Pop was mistakenly read out backwards on TV as "Pop-Tart," which proved far catchier than its archrival's fuddy-duddy Country Squares. So, as it turns out in the movie, all the mutual espionage over the recipe, mounted merrily on the scale of a space race, amounts to zilch in the face of an ultimate arbiter: Human error. It's a fun watch. So, are "grrr-reat" brands developing a funny bone? Are they being advised by image managers to laugh along if the joke's on them? Or is there something else to be read in the goofy grin of Seinfeld's open dare? Don't ask a chatbot.

GUEST VIEW

India can't risk slackening in the Indian Ocean Region

PARUL CHANDRA



is a senior New Delhi-based journalist.

It's a measure of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) archipelago of the Maldives that India recently chose to host its new foreign minister, Moosa Zameer, despite the hurly-burly of Lok Sabha elections. With the Maldives' President Mohamed Muizzu-led government already in China's tight embrace, and the consequent turbulence in bilateral ties, India can ill-afford to cede further space to Beijing. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar clearly spelt out India's strategic concerns to Zameer, telling him that being close neighbours, the development of bilateral ties is based on "reciprocal sensitivity."

Such straight talk was required, as the pro-China Muizzu has already given New Delhi much grief, not just with his anti-India rhetoric, but also his administration's decision to ask India to replace with civilians its 77 military personnel posted there, in charge of two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, even though these operated under the Maldivian flag and with directions from the Mal-

dives National Defence Forces (MNDF).

Muizzu rode to power as Maldivian president by running an "India Out" campaign, citing the issue of sovereignty, which found traction in the country, especially among conservative voters. Muizzu has, however, not yet repealed a presidential decree issued during the tenure of his predecessor Ibu Solih banning that campaign. Perhaps because it is clear that he will need to deliver growth and development, for which India remains an important partner, regardless of all the tall promises China might make.

New Delhi would have also conveyed to Malé its displeasure over its decision to not renew a hydrography agreement with India, while signing a defence pact with China that involves training the MNDF and supplying non-lethal defence equipment. For New Delhi, both are red lines, much like Chinese involvement in the Indian telecommunications sector and digital identity projects in India's neighbourhood.

In seeking to protect its own strategic interests in the vast IOR, New Delhi has to constantly walk on eggshells. For, political leaders in the region's island states have learnt to play the two Asian giants against each other. In Sri Lanka, for instance, India was cold-shouldered, while China thrived

during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidential tenure. They also know how to whip up anti-India sentiment by playing the sovereignty and nationalism cards to win elections.

While New Delhi-Malé relations are currently strained, the New Delhi-Colombo relationship is currently thriving. Having provided financial assistance to Sri Lanka as it battled an economic collapse after the covid pandemic, India has been quietly working to contain China by bolstering its strategic foothold in the island nation.

Colombo recently gave its nod for India to develop the strategically-located Kankesanthurai port in northern Sri Lanka. Barely 100km away from the deep sea port of Karaikal in Puducherry, it will provide vital connectivity between the two nations. In addition, an Indo-Russian joint venture recently won the contract to operate the Matlala airport built with Chinese loans in Hambantota. Sri Lanka is still trying to negotiate a

restructured loan with China's Exim Bank for the airport, which has been a commercial failure. Both these projects will give India a vital foothold in the region where both Sri Lanka and the Maldives are on board China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Unlike China, loans extended by India do not leave their beneficiaries in debt traps. The Maldives, for instance, is still reeling under the \$1.3 billion loan it took from China during Abdulla Yameen's presidential tenure from 2013 to 2018. At present, nearly 30% of Maldives' external debt is owed to

China, while it's only 10% in the case of India.

The inflated cost of Chinese-executed projects and the opacity that marks them, however, has not deterred IOR nations from availing them to build infrastructure. Sri Lanka, for instance, found itself

unable to repay the commercial loan it took to develop the Hambantota port. The island nation's biggest bilateral debt is to China, placed at \$7 bil-

lion, while it stands at \$1 billion to India. Unable to match Beijing's financial resources, New Delhi has chosen to woo IOR nations through its policy of Security and Growth for All (SAGAR), warning them not to fall prey to Chinese debt-trap policies.

At a time when naval forays by China are rapidly increasing in the region, the day is not too far when a Chinese aircraft carrier will sail into the IOR, given that Beijing has been regularly deploying warships, submarines and 'spy' vessels to the region for well over a decade.

India too has increased deployments to countries in the region. It regularly sends warships to conduct joint patrols and surveillance of the vast exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of countries like the Maldives and Seychelles. India's commissioning of a naval base, INS Jatayu, in the Lakshadweep islands in March this year will also add to the country's strategic heft in the IOR.

With the joint inauguration of an upgraded jetty and airstrip on the Agaléga islands of Mauritius earlier this year, India now also has an outpost in the western Indian Ocean, a crucial addition to its China containment strategy. Even so, New Delhi cannot afford any let up in its battle for influence in the IOR.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

End erratic intervention: Adopt a rulebook to tame food prices

Let's replace a policy that distorts markets and worsens scarcities with a pre-set framework of rules



HIMANSHU

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Latest data released by the government confirms fears of India's economy being in the grip of stubborn inflation, driven primarily by food. While overall inflation has stayed above 4% for more than two years, with the April 2024 reading at 4.83%, data also showed a widening gap between rural and urban inflation. Food inflation has been more than 8% since November, with cereal inflation witnessing a secular rise since January. For April, cereal inflation was at 8.63%. Within cereals, rice inflation was high at 12.5%, with April marking the 19th consecutive month of above-10% inflation. Even wheat has shown a rising trend since January, with the April reading at 6%. Inflation in pulses has been above 10% since June. But the sharpest increase has been for vegetables, with inflation at more than 25% for the last six months.

The stubbornness of food inflation is surprising, since international prices began easing long back. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, cereal prices globally fell by 18% in April on an year-on-year basis. Even domestic supply seems to have increased, with claims by the ministry of agriculture of record production in almost every crop group. Given that India's economic recovery has been muted, a demand push is an unlikely driving force. If anything, core sector inflation (excluding food and fuel) at 3% confirms a demand

deficit in the economy. Several other indicators, such as rural real wages and earnings data from Periodic Labour Force Surveys, suggest either declining or stagnant incomes in the country.

Estimates from the ministry of agriculture have largely been robust, although recent years have seen market associations, traders and farmers questioning them. Unseasonal rains, heat waves and other climatic factors have affected production, even though official data does not report any sharp decline. While production estimates and the fall in cereal availability may be a factor, it is not the only one.

The problem includes knee-jerk and ad-hoc decisions taken by the government on stock holding limits, apart from export and import rules covering quantitative restrictions on trade, the unintended effect of which has been artificial scarcity.

Despite the government's intention of deregulating agricultural markets by bringing in three contentious farm laws, it has continued its policy of excessive regulation. While the trio of laws was withdrawn, the government's reliance on arbitrary export curbs, price controls and domestic restrictions under the Essential Commodities Act (ECA) has raised uncertainty in farm markets, with price stability taking a resultant hit.

QUICK READ

The government's approach to taming food inflation has been flawed. Ad-hoc export and other trade restrictions appear to have raised supplier anxiety and worsened agricultural shortages.

What India needs is a clearly defined framework of rules so that nobody gets nasty surprises, output incentives don't get hurt and both consumers and farmers are served well by its design.

Exports of wheat were banned in May 2022, followed by a similar ban on broken rice in August, a regime expanded to include all non-basmati exports in July 2023. The ECA was invoked in June 2023 on wheat, limiting stocks held by traders, with further restrictions imposed in February 2024. The same month, the government asked traders to disclose their rice stocks every week. This was extended to pulses this April. Onions were subject to similar intervention aimed at price control.

Most of these calls seem to have been taken without adequate scrutiny of why these commodity prices were unstable and without any ground assessment of crop availability, demand and supply. These were also used as a scare tactic to push prices down.

These measures, however, have not led to any significant price reduction. On the contrary, they have stoked fear among traders. The very signal of a panic reaction from the Centre appears to have fuelled speculative price inclines in many commodities.

Excessive use of controls and other hard tactics to tame inflation is also detrimental to the interests of farmers, who end up punished for rising prices. Their lost opportunity to earn more from the market has acted as a crop disincentive. India's decline in pulse production is an example of a supply response to the financial rewards of suppliers being reduced by erratic government policy.

Farmers were deprived of remunerative earnings not just because of export curbs, but also bulk imports, resulting in lower price realizations for them. While inflation control is necessary to protect India's most vulnerable people, it must not be at the cost of farmers and their incentives to raise output. We need a price policy that protects the interests of farmers and consumers both, without using unnecessary strictures. Let's adopt a comprehensive rule-based framework to stabilize agricultural prices. Let us replace ad-hoc tools with a rational approach.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

It's amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper.

JERRY SEINFELD



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Industry links with academia are critical to success in biopharma

India can grab opportunities in the biopharmaceutical sector by combining academic and business skills to boost innovation



RAJIV KUMAR & HARSHVARDHAN SINGH are, respectively, former vice chairman of Niti Aayog and chairman of Pahle India Foundation, and research associate at Pahle India Foundation.

The biopharmaceutical industry has been evolving rapidly. During the turbulent period spanning 2019 to 2021, amid the upheaval caused by the covid pandemic, it emerged as a focal point of global discourse. Biopharmaceuticals are drugs and therapies synthesized from living organisms, which includes vaccines, biologics, biosimilars and evolving therapies like cell and gene therapies.

The global biopharmaceutical industry has grown significantly since 1982. Estimated at \$528 billion, it is expected to grow at a compounded annual growth rate in double-digits for years. India has replicated this growth, ranking among the top 12 biotechnology destinations globally. In 2023, the Indian biopharma industry surpassed \$92 billion, reflecting 15% growth from the previous year. This growth is driven by a rise in chronic diseases, higher income levels, demand for better treatments and the advantages of biopharma over traditional medicine (such as fewer side effects and greater effectiveness in treating chronic illnesses). However, as the industry continues to expand, we realize that in an era of continued innovation, it becomes even more important for the industry to adapt to a fast-evolving curve. In this context, while the industry has witnessed tremendous growth over the past decade, further research and innovation in the biopharmaceutical sector necessitate collaborative efforts between the industry and academia.

Collaboration between industry and academia is a strategic imperative: The development and commercialization of bio-therapeutic products not only require extensive research, but also clinical and non-clinical trials that adhere to regulatory norms, necessitating academia and industry collaboration. While academia possesses skills in the research domain, industry must play its expected role in the commercialization of research: i.e., manufacturing, testing, approval and marketing.

While the large international pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors have historically been recognized as drivers of the discovery and development of new drugs, academia has also made significant contributions, laying foundations for the development of several drugs. Drugs such as Paclitaxel, Vorinostat, Prezista, Viread and Dexamethasone have their discovery origins in academia. Despite this, academia's role has often been perceived as secondary—supporting drug discovery by providing an extended research base to the industry through peer-reviewed publications and strategic partnerships.

Academic drug discovery offers the promise of pioneering new approaches to drug development, leveraging academic innovation and thought processes, to cater to evolving needs and demands. In



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this context, it is crucial to emphasize that while pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms shall continue to be the major source of new drug development, there is a compelling argument for academia to play a more direct role in translating fundamental science into therapeutics.

Collaborations between industry and academia offer numerous benefits. The covid pandemic demonstrated the success of such collaborations in swiftly developing life-saving vaccines and therapies. India's first home-grown gene therapy for cancer, developed by IIT Bombay, Tata Memorial Centre, and ImmunoACT, is another example. Programmes like the Pfizer-IIT Delhi Innovation and IP Programme and INDovation are good examples of the larger pharmaceutical industry's efforts to boost the domestic innovation ecosystem. These collaborations foster innovation, as shown by the incubation of 34 healthcare innovators and 19 intellectual property filings in diagnostics, drug delivery, medical devices, and healthcare training.

Additionally, industry-academia linkages also enable setting up a framework for nurturing talent with the skill-sets needed to meet the current demands of industry and prepare them for the biopharma sector's innovation-driven future.

It has been heartening to note that several pharma and biopharma companies have established global capability centres in India, employing nearly half a million professionals. These centres engage talent in a diverse range of functions across the entire research and development (R&D) value chain, drug commercialization, manufacturing and supply-chain management, physician and patient engagement, business strategy and digital operations.

In recognizing the benefits of strong industry-

academia linkages, it is essential to highlight the establishment of the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) and National Biopharma Mission (NBM). Both these initiatives enhance India's biopharmaceutical capabilities, aiming for global competitiveness and improved healthcare standards through innovative product development.

Academic institutions in focus: While celebrating our nation's advancements in biotechnology, including the establishment of a department of biotechnology in 1986 and becoming the third-largest hub for biotech in the Asia Pacific region, there's a need to encourage further research, innovate and expedite drug development in the biopharma sector.

Empowering academic institutions, particularly through the establishment of technology transfer offices (TTOs), can enhance technology transfer capabilities, ensuring the translation of research into practical solutions. This will accelerate the transformation of scientific discoveries into products that benefit society.

Funding for schemes like India's Uchatar Avishkar Yojana should be increased to foster innovation among students and faculty in premier technological institutes. To address the shortage of qualified faculty and researchers, a programme similar to China's

Thousand Talent Programme could be used to recruit overseas Indians from top global institutes with attractive incentives. Additionally, universities should implement specialized training on legal and regulatory frameworks for new biotech interventions. Integrating these into the curriculum will better prepare students for the complexities of the biotech landscape and help nurture a skilled workforce to drive innovation and research.

QUICK READ

While academia possesses skills in the research domain, industry must play its expected role in the commercialization of findings through manufacturing, testing, approval and marketing.

An incentive scheme like China's talent programme could be used to recruit overseas Indians from top global institutes while domestic institutions gear up for the future of biotech.

Making ChatGPT 'sexy' is not the best way to make it better

Customer engagement must not be at the cost of our mental health



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OpenAI's Sam Altman referred to the film *Her*, an AI romance

Her." That was the single tweet that OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman posted as his lieutenants demonstrated a new ChatGPT with the same alluring vocal flourishes Scarlett Johansson used in the movie by that name about a man who falls in love with his AI bot. The most impressive thing about the new GPT-4o (the 'o' stands for omni) is that it can discuss what it 'sees' through your phone camera in real time, a skill that Google faked in a demo for its AI model last December. More startling was that it didn't just sound human but strangely seductive. "Hey there," the new version of ChatGPT said in a coy woman's voice to a young man in the company's main video demonstration. "I see you're rocking an OpenAI hoodie. Nice choice."

In a live demo at OpenAI's headquarters in San Francisco, the AI system surprised the audience when it said, "Wow, that's quite the outfit you've got on," to someone it was helping with an algebra problem. *Bloomberg News*, which was at the event, referred to its tone as "flirtatious."

In another video demo, the AI, once again with a female voice, laughed coquettishly as an OpenAI staffer pretended to ask it for advice on what to wear for an interview. "Oh, Rocky!" it said giggling after he put on a silly hat. "That's quite a statement piece!"

If OpenAI's mostly male engineers are trying to build the perfect girlfriend, they seem to be on the right track. If the company is trying to build a more accurate and reliable AI model, however, they still have a long way to go. GPT-4o is still only slightly ahead on key AI benchmarks and early tests show it continues to make mistakes on key tasks.

The company has instead focused on leaping ahead with user experience, making GPT-4o more of a consumer play than one for enterprise customers. Its new model can infer emotions and respond to audio as quickly as a human would in conversation. That could fulfil a long-time goal in tech of 'ambient computing,' which eschews having to stare into tiny screen and type with your thumbs for just talking and showing things to a computer.

There's plenty of potential in that, from live tutoring to having a clever digital assistant analyse your computer screen as you work. But OpenAI's efforts to make its AI so engaging are disconcerting.

What are the social and psychological consequences of regularly speaking to a flirty, fun and ultimately agreeable artificial voice on your phone, and then encour-

tering a different dynamic with men and women in real life? What happens when emotionally vulnerable people develop an unhealthy attachment to GPT-4o?

OpenAI did not respond to these questions at the time of writing, or explain why it had given GPT-4o so much more personality. If its objective was to make its product more engaging for consumers—as it has already tried to do with developers—that could open up a can of worms, threatening insidious effects on our collective mental health. Remember those priorities are what led Facebook to design algorithms that promoted the most outrageous posts on its site to keep people scrolling, helping sow greater political division.

Yet, you can see why Altman may be pushing to make his chatbot more sticky. User growth for ChatGPT has been stagnating, as competing bots like Anthropic's Claude and Google's Gemini race for market share. It's likely why he's also making GPT-4, OpenAI's most advanced model on the market, free for all.

OpenAI didn't describe GPT-4o as a "personal assistant" but that seems to be what the company and its rivals are now chasing. Google [has announced a similar AI agent called Project Astra].

Elon Musk's AI company x.AI is also working on an app that will act as a personal assistant, according to an April 2024 funding pitch deck seen by Bloomberg Opinion. The \$20-a-month app, which will also have a free tier, aims to show an AI-generated feed of suggested news articles and reminders to, for instance, buy flowers at a nearby store for a friend's birthday, or to buy concert tickets for a favourite band that is on tour, according to one slide. The deck adds that by integrating with personal data from X, it can create a "supercharged social experience." Musk tweeted on Tuesday that a "major upgrade to Grok" was on its way. Meta is also exploring AI-assisted earphones with cameras and its Ray-Ban smart glasses already include an AI assistant.

As tech giants converge on digital assistants, they may see personality as the new AI battleground. But racing to make chatbots more sexy could have bizarre side effects. Pointing to *Her* was perhaps a fitting metaphor for Sam Altman: The movie doesn't end well for humans. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Ponder what AI does for us versus what it's doing to us

UNNY RADHAKRISHNAN



is chief executive officer at Digitas India.

To erase the line between man and machine is to obscure the line between men and gods," says the tagline in the teaser of the 2015 movie *Ex-Machina*. What technology does for us has long been evident. But, in the last decade or so, ever since social media became central to our lives, what technology does to us has become a matter of profound interest. Even more so now, as conversations on artificial intelligence (AI) go mainstream.

Making machines that behave like or resemble human beings has been a pursuit for about two centuries. As early as the 1800s, Austro-Hungarian inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen tried making a speaking machine using bellows and reeds to model the human voice box. This was later improved by Charles Wheatstone, which in turn influenced Alexander Graham Bell, who tried creating his own device. While Bell's speaking machine didn't materialize, it helped him invent the telephone. The first electronic talking machine, Voder, was cre-

ated by Bell Labs and exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. In the 1950s, early AI pioneers began working on speech recognition (as distinct from understanding). Decades and many breakthroughs later, we are in the throes of a man-machine interaction revolution. But what does it do to us?

Human interactions with 'intelligent' machines are not just about machines. They are also about us. When we interact with machines that respond like humans, what does it do to us, our perceptions, emotions and neural wirings?

Much is unknown, except that it changes us. Just as human-to-human interactions trigger our neurons, make biochemical changes and alter our bodies, so do human interactions with machines. Even as we get into these interactions with the full awareness that they are only machines, we may slowly reach a point where we are 'in communion' with them.

The first chatbot came much before the internet went global. An MIT professor and computer scientist, Joseph Weizenbaum, built Eliza in 1966 as a conversational interface between humans and machines. Eliza engaged with users like a psychotherapist and many people started attributing human-like feelings to the programme, wanting to

share intimate matters and spending time alone with the machine. AI bots are now being touted as a solution for loneliness, as digital companions. This assumes a chasm crossed from AI's ability to 'understand' what we are saying to an ability to 'care.'

Is there a Turing Test for empathy? That is the question.

A recent study by Sherry Turkle at MIT, 'Who Do We Become When We Talk to Machines?' delves deep into the impact of human-machine conversations. Turkle, a sociologist and trained psychologist, is the

author of acclaimed books like *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* and *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. She has taught at MIT along with Joseph Weizenbaum and also studied people's interaction with Eliza, terming our emotional engagement the 'Eliza Effect.' Her new MIT study explores how our digital relationships affect our understanding

of human connections and is also an attempt to develop methodologies that study how artificial empathy changes our relational capacity. Turkle coins an interesting term, 'artificial intimacy.' The study had participants from a wide range of backgrounds and demographic groups. As either new or regular users of AI-based conversational tools such as Replika, Pi, Woebot and ChatGPT, they were found to experience an emotional bond with the technologies they were engaging with. The result of this study raises some points that might have a far-reaching impact on society and perhaps even on the evolution of our species.

First, all or the majority of participants found it easier to deal with machines than humans, because it replaces "stressful human connections." Real relationships have more friction and are relatively difficult to deal with. Talking to machines make people feel less vulnerable, as there is no friction, no second-guessing and no

Chatting with chatbots can make people feel less vulnerable, as there is neither friction nor second-guessing, but might an emotional vacuum created by this leave us emotionally fragile?

Second, consider the argument that AI built on the collective intelligence of many experts is better than any single expert. Eric Schmidt, former chairperson of Google, has been quoted as saying that Generative AI will make "much of human conversations unnecessary." But Turkle asks the most important question: "When we are in human conversation, we often care less about the information an utterance transfers than its tone and emotional intent. In a world that deals in averages, what happens to our sensitivity to all this?"

What does all this mean to us? What does it mean to be human? Is being human now a relative term? Are we being shaped by past data or the law of averages? Will we get more standardized and homogenized?

More questions. Few answers.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A right to fairness

SC verdict in Newslick case affirms that adherence to due process is more than a procedural requirement



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

DESCRIBED AS AN “executive’s court” in some quarters in recent times, the Supreme Court has proved its critics wrong yet again. A 41-page judgment of Justice Sandeep Mehta and Justice B R Gavi, authored by the former, has highlighted the importance of due process.

Due process of law is not only an important fundamental right but a time-tested yardstick to judge the maturity of a civilisation. But, is it just a procedural requirement? Or does it offer substantive protection against the state’s arbitrary exercise of power?

Justices Mehta and Gavi delivered their verdict in *Newslick* founder-editor Prabir Purkayastha’s case. Purkayastha was not informed of the “grounds of arrest” as required by the Constitution’s Article 22 before his production before the Additional Sessions Judge (ASJ). However, the ASJ mechanically passed the remand order at 6 am on October 4, 2023.

The SC verdict has rightly drawn a fine line between the “reasons of arrest,” which are formal and common to all arrested persons, and the “grounds of arrest,” which have to be peculiar to an individual arrested person. If the “grounds of arrest” are not communicated in writing, the right to life and personal liberty is violated making the arrest and detention illegal, despite repeated remand orders.

Even the first major human rights instrument, the *Magna Carta* (1215), talked of only procedural rights — of course, only of nobles or barons. Yet, it too was categorical that “no freeman shall be seized or imprisoned or stripped of his rights... except by the lawful judgment of his co-equals or by the law of the land.” The expression “due process” was used for the first time two centuries later in the statute of British King Edward III. But it was the Fifth Amendment to the American Constitution (1791) that introduced the concept of “due process” in a constitution. Subsequently, the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed, in addition to the right to equality, the right to life and liberty. It prohibited their curtailment without the due process of law.

However, it would be wrong to view due process as just a procedural safeguard. It involves the right to fairness, reasonableness, justness, non-arbitrariness. Several American laws have been struck down on criteria set by the Due Process Doctrine. New rights have also

been recognised under this doctrine.

The history of “due process” in India is equally fascinating, but deeply frustrating. In 1918, the Indian National Congress asked the colonial government to revoke all laws that allowed state authorities to arrest or detain people without due process. Balgangadhar Tilak and MK Gandhi invoked due process in their defence against unjust laws. But the framers of the Indian Constitution who had initially shown keen interest in the Due Process Doctrine abandoned it.

Constituent Assembly deliberations show how we went back on due process. On March 17, 1947, the Assembly received a note from K M Munshi, a member of the fundamental rights sub-committee. It included a draft provision: “No person shall be deprived of his life, liberty or property without due process of law”. Ambedkar’s own draft too included the expression, “due process of law”. The Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee approved the due process clause on April 15, 1947.

In subsequent deliberations of the Advisory Committee headed by Sardar Patel, few members such as C Rajagopalachari and Govind Ballabh Pant expressed reservations — they felt the clause could limit the legislative powers of the state. It was however B N Rau, not even a member of the Constituent Assembly but its adviser, who can be blamed for restricting the scope of Article 21. Borrowing from Irish (Article 40(4)) and Japanese (Article 31) constitutions, he proposed the insertion of “personal” before liberty and replaced due process with the narrower expression “procedure established by law”. Surprisingly, this major dilution was approved on January 18, 1948, by the drafting committee headed by Ambedkar, which met without quorum.

Several members were disappointed to see the due process clause being dropped. HV Pataskar talked about the danger of routine detentions for indefinite periods without this guarantee. K C Sharma maintained that due process provided minimum standards of fairness and without it, Article 21 cannot be termed a Fundamental Right. Kazi Karimuddin called it a sad chapter of our constitutional history. On December 7, 1948, Article 21 was adopted as Ambedkar failed to

take an unequivocal position in favour of due process. Bakshi Tek Chand termed Ambedkar’s act as “one of great mysteries”. K T Shah feared that people would be detained without trial on false pretences. The last 70 years have proved these Constituent Assembly members right.

Ambedkar tried to salvage the situation in September 1949 when he introduced Article 22 and termed it as a “compensation” for the omission of due process in the right to life and personal liberty. But then Article 22(1) and (2) incorporated the guarantees — right to counsel of choice and production — before the magistrate within 24 hours that were already part of the colonial government’s Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.

After independence, starting from its regressive judgment in *AK Gopalan* (1950) to *ADM Jabalpur* (1976), the SC contributed to undermining the due process by overemphasising the literal meaning of procedure established by law. The court did change its stand in the Bank Nationalisation case (1970) and extended the due process to the right to property. Subsequently, Justice Fazal Ali’s dissent in *Maneka Gandhi* (1978) became a majority opinion and due process was judicially recognised as part of the right to life and personal liberty. Every law must now be reasonable, just, fair and non-arbitrary. Moreover, the 44th Amendment (1978) made the right to life and personal liberty a non-derogable right that can no longer be suspended, even during an emergency.

In *Prasad Singla* (2023), the SC termed preventive detention laws as a colonial legacy with great potential of abuse. It said that every procedural requirement must be rigidly followed. India, however, continues to have several stringent preventive detention laws, both at the Centre and state levels. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) over 12,000 people were in prisons in 2021 under such laws and 76 per cent of prison inmates were under trial in 2022. Unfortunately, the part of the 44th amendment on preventive detention has not been notified even after 46 years.

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A WELCOME MESSAGE

SC order in Newslick case is heartening, reinforces importance of due process, regardless of the offence

TWO FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES of jurisprudence — “bail not jail” and “innocent until proven guilty” — are diluted in cases brought under “special” laws like the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). In these, investigating agencies and the prosecution are granted extraordinary powers of arrest and detention. In essence, such laws shift the burden of proof on the accused. Stringent provisions also place a high threshold for the grant of bail. By invalidating the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, founder-editor of the portal Newslick, the Supreme Court has upheld in principle and practice the constitutional protection offered to citizens under Article 22(1). The state argued that since Purkayastha is accused of serious offences such as “terrorist acts” and “raising funds for terrorist acts”, he should not be released on a “technicality”. The Bench of Justices B R Gavi and Sandeep Mehta said that every accused “has a fundamental and a statutory right to be informed about the grounds of arrest in writing and a copy of such written grounds of arrest have to be furnished to the arrested person as a matter of course and without exception at the earliest”.

In a legal system where the process can often be a form of punishment, the integrity of so-called technical procedures must be unimpeachable. Article 22(1) states that “No person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest nor shall he be denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice.” In *Pankaj Bansal vs Union of India* (2023), the SC held that furnishing “a written copy of the grounds for arrest” was mandated under the PMLA. In Purkayastha’s case, it found that since a similar provision exists in the UAPA, the accused should have been provided with the grounds of arrest before his detention. He was not. Essentially, and significantly, the Court has said that a fundamental right is not watered down in UAPA cases.

The Court made it clear that Purkayastha’s release — he was granted bail by the trial court hours after the SC order — was not a comment on the merits of the case or the charges against Newslick. The order does, however, underline the perils of what has become in practice an alternate justice system, meant to deal with “heinous” crimes. The provisions in such laws are, arguably, justifiable in exceptional circumstances, especially with respect to national security. However, their use has surged: NCRB data showed a 23 per cent rise in UAPA cases in 2022 compared to previous years, while the PMLA cases grew by 450 per cent in the first three years of the current government’s second term, compared to the same period in its first term. This context makes the SC’s order all the more welcome. It affirms once again the Court’s role as the guardian of individual rights. It is also a message to investigating agencies: Due process, and the “technical” procedures that comprise it, cannot be circumvented.

MY SCHEME, YOUR SCHEME

Congress’s promised grain ration of 10 kg/person/month speaks about a competitive politics of welfare and its limits

IN 2019, PRIME Minister Narendra Modi swept the Lok Sabha polls on the back of his government’s welfare schemes for building rural homes, toilets and roads, providing access to banking, electricity and LPG connections, and the Rs 6,000 annual cash transfer to landholding farmers. In 2024, the scheme that is seemingly a big draw among voters is the one giving 5 kg of free rice or wheat to about 813.5 million persons. Proof of its impact on the ground is the Congress, more than midway through the ongoing elections, promising to double the free ration quota for the “poor” among the scheme’s beneficiaries.

But schemes are only as good as their implementation. Just as the focused execution and near saturation coverage of the earlier flagship programmes helped cultivate a pro-poor image for Modi nationally during his first term, the free grain scheme delivered during the Covid crisis. Till the early 2000s, the southern states were largely the ones with reasonably well-functioning public distribution systems (PDS). By around 2015-16, they were joined by the likes of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. But the Covid period saw NFSA beneficiaries even in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand actually receiving free grain. The ruling party’s victory in the 2022 Assembly elections in UP was widely attributed to the Modi-Yogi Adityanath “double-engine” government’s efforts at not just expanding the reach of the PDS, but also ensuring last-mile delivery of grain to eligible households.

The Congress’s promised grain ration of 10 kg/person/month is notable not only for the additional fiscal cost it would entail (even if restricted to the “poor”). It goes contrary to party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi’s recent pronouncement that government policies should aim at making people “atmanirbhar” (self-reliant), not “nirbhar” (dependent). At a public rally, she asked the crowd to choose between free 5-kg ration and employment that will earn them an independent income. The apparent about-turn and competitive free grain offer is, perhaps, also reflective of a deeper political economy malaise. Governments find it more expedient to deliver freebies, whether in kind or as direct cash transfers, than investing in public education, healthcare, irrigation or agricultural research and extension that take time to yield results. It doesn’t help that voters are also sceptical about state capacity and hence increasingly transactional and short-termist.

ONE-MAN ARMY

Carrying the baton through turbulent times, now hanging up his boots, Sunil Chhetri represents best of Indian football

NOT ALWAYS AMONG the best in the world, the skills of India’s football heroes haven’t gone unnoticed. There was the blistering pace of Chuni Goswami, inventiveness of Tulsidas Balam, aura of PK Banerjee, grace of Jo-Paul Ancheri, flair of IM Vijayan and flamboyance of Bhaichung Bhutia. Then, there’s Sunil Chhetri, the one-man army who kept reinventing himself, acted as a bridge between generations, made sure Indian football didn’t sink in the last decade. A star of his generation, the India captain announced on Thursday that he will hang up his boots after the 2026 World Cup and 2027 Asian Cup joint qualifier against Kuwait on June 6.

Chhetri’s greatness is often lost in the numbers: 150 national team matches and 94 goals. But statistics do not reveal his actual impact on Indian football. When he made his international debut as a 20-year-old, Chhetri had teammates who were born in the 1970s. When he quits as a 39-year-old, Chhetri will be surrounded by those born in 2002 and 2003. Carrying the baton diligently through turbulent times, he survived several churning. Bhutia’s era was of semi-professionals where the players held day-jobs to support their football dreams. Chhetri ushered in an age of full-blown professionalism in Indian football, right from the way the players played and what they ate. They had the enterprise to go the extra mile to fine-tune their skills and the daring to dream of a career abroad.

Chhetri’s emergence in the mid-noughties never allowed Indian fans to miss the legendary Bhutia. That might not be the case in the post-Chhetri era. He scored many goals and created some. He was a striker who could double up as a winger. A forward who would rush back to defend corners. A 5-foot-6-inch tall player who leapt over towering defenders and scored from headers. Who next after Chhetri is a question that has lingered for almost a decade. It continues to trouble football fans.



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

THE DEATH OF a celebrated writer is an occasion to mourn losses — of her genius, the excellence of her craft, her prodigious intellect, the accolades that she had won over her lifetime, the circumstances of her writing life. But it is also a moment to remember how her words made one feel — a sense of being seen, heard, or perhaps, simply reassured about the universality of emotions, whose surfeit or absence forms the leitmotif of everyday life.

In ‘Family Furnishings’, a story from her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), the Canadian writer and Nobel laureate Alice Munro, who died this week, wrote, “There was a danger whenever I was on home ground. It was the danger of seeing my life through eyes other than my own.” Munro’s gaze was anything but the other’s: There was both comprehension and empathy for the individual battles one fought in the privacy of one’s mind. What Munro held back from — most of the time — was omniscience, the writerly, almost patriarchal, tendency to explain the lives of protagonists back to them. Like her friend, the writer Margaret Atwood, she made female gaze a thing long before it gained currency.

What could it be about the lives of girls and women that Munro could get to the heart of, that set her apart? That despite their setting in rural Canada, their stories resonated with readers across the world? In the story ‘Too Much Happiness’ about the mathematician

CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

Alice Munro’s short stories traced the unpredictable archaeologies of human hearts

and writer Sophia Kovalevsky, from the eponymous anthology, Munro writes, “Always remember that when a man goes out of the room, he leaves everything in it behind... When a woman goes out she carries everything that happened in the room along with her.” Munro mapped this storied baggage without critique — she wrote not so much about her characters but as them, sharing the bitter taste of their disappointments, the sudden flares of resentment, and the illicit thrill of hope. Like her readers, she both discovers and feels her way through relationships — marriage and infidelity, motherhood and daughterhood — but also through loneliness and grief, love and longing, desire and abandonment. It makes reading Munro a visceral experience, like a conversation with an old friend who knows the many versions of the person one has been.

In her Nobel Prize interview in 2013, Munro spoke of her affinity to happy endings. One of the first stories she heard as a child was Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. Its sobering coda had made such an impression on her young mind that she was determined to rework its course to give the mermaid the happily ever after she deserved. By the time she began writing though, the spell had broken. Munro realised that happy endings were not the stuff of real life. They belonged in the realm of fantasies, in the hoariness of once-upon-a-times and relied on larger-than-life characters to prop

them up. Real life was the work of ordinariness, its tedium broken by the passage of time and messy, erratic chance.

There is an interiority to Munro’s stories that comes from being an insider. The writer spoke often of drawing from her own life — her troubled relationship with her school-teacher mother who developed Parkinson’s when Munro was in her early 40s, the ennu of her first marriage, the solace that books offered, and learning to write amid domestic chores and childcare duties. The sparse economy of her short stories owed a debt to these roles she played in family life, the constraint of time that she battled against like every woman. In the unchanging routine of daily living, as men and women worked and sparred, lived and lost, she traced the unpredictable archaeologies of the human heart.

Unlike most of her counterparts, Munro consciously stayed away from an overtly public life, an achievement in itself, given the range of accolades that she garnered, from the Man Booker International Prize to the Nobel Prize. It could have been her characteristic diffidence but for her readers, it spelled confidence: Munro knew the vagaries of human nature like few others. Formal validations are necessary accoutrements of success, but beyond their endorsement, what remained was how Munro made her readers feel — seen and heard.

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MAY 17, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

TRIPURA FLOODS

THE DEATH TOLL has mounted to 27 in rain-battered Tripura where the Army has been alerted about further worsening of the situation in the wake of incessant cloudbursts and fresh landslides. About 1.25 lakh people were rendered homeless in the last four days. Chief Minister Nripen Chakravorty who reviewed the situation with officials, urged the Centre for Rs 1 crore grant as assistance for providing relief to the flood victims.

PUNJAB COPS ATTACKED

TERRORISTS AMBUSHED A police party, shot

at and injured a head constable in Amritsar district, looted a bank in Ferozepur district and set the employment exchange building on fire at Batala in Gurdaspur district in the last 24 hours in Punjab. The accused snatched a revolver from a sub-inspector and two rifles from constables in Amritsar district.

NO EVEREST CLIMB

A SECOND SUMMIT attempt by India’s Everest expedition was called off after an avalanche hit the expedition’s third high-altitude camp (7,320 mt), injuring one member and three Sherpa guides. The attempt was to have been made by Rekha Sharma and three other mem-

bers. N D Sherpa of the 5/3 Gorkha Rifles and three Nepalese Sherpas who were in the camp were seriously injured in the accident.

CBSE CLASS 12 RESULTS

O N BABUNARAYAN of Kendriya Vidyalaya, Kalpakkam (Tamil Nadu), has obtained the highest aggregate marks (378 out of 400) in the All-India Senior Secondary Certificate (Class 12) examination. M Sriam of Delhi School R K Puram New Delhi is second with 375 marks. Amongst girls, Madhu Anand of Manav Sthali Public School, New Delhi, has obtained the highest aggregate marks, 368 out of 400.

11 THE IDEAS PAGE

Thank you, Papa, our hero

My father, Sushil Modi, was a doer, proud of his actions, never scared to fail, but quiet, observant, thoughtful, patiently listening to criticism, self-correcting and seeking ways to help Bihar



AKSHAY AMRITANSHU

WHILE TRIBUTES POUR in for my father and we as a family deal with our emotions, it is overwhelming to be reminded of what a great man he was. My Life's Umbrella is the best phrase to describe him — when there was too much heat and pressure, he was the cover, when there was an emotional out-pour, he was the protector, when I fumbled, he was my walking stick.

While he was a "Modi", he surnamed us Tathagath and Amritanshu so that we find our own independent identities in life. While he was a science graduate, he regretted that he could not study further. He knew that providing us a good education would be his best investment. When I made it to Oxford to study law, he asked me to check if it was spam mail. Such was his grounded and practical approach in life.

Sending us to a boarding school in Ajmer, making sure he visited us every two months, dutifully traveling for our annual functions, celebrating every achievement, reminding us of verses from the Bhagavad Gita, was his way of telling us that we meant the world to him.

His day would be long, but he made sure the family ate dinner together. He would ask us about our day and guide us, making sure he was not spoon feeding us. When we went to study/work away from him, he spoke on the telephone every day, always concerned, listening patiently.

He reminded us that one inherits the family name, but life's experiences have to be learned and earned, through toil, dedication, patience, sacrifice and failure and there were no shortcuts.

He was a hard worker, disciplined to the core and a stickler for good habits. Party leaders used to complain that he would escape backstage before a meeting, open his *dabba*, finish two rolls and come back quietly. A rumour once spread that he loved *karelas*. For an entire month, wherever he went, he was served *karela*!

He was soft but blunt, sharp but not impulsive. My mother often wondered why he was a politician, soft spoken as he was, nice and unassuming. I often wondered if there was a better field for his talent. But he was never in doubt. He was a doer, proud of his actions, never scared to fail, but quiet, observant, thoughtful, patiently listening to criticism, self-correcting and seeking ways to help Bihar.

As a politician, he often annoyed people with his straight-forward approach. He ended up saying "no" to things he could not deliver, and never gave false assurances, even if it meant facing people's ire.

He had no tax background, in fact he was one of those who feared mathematics. But when the opportunity knocked to be the finance minister of the state or head the GST Empowered Committee, he took up the challenge head on. One had to "get a knack of the subject, then nothing was impossible", he would say. Seeking recommendations to read



CR Sasikumar

on a subject, ordering school books, speaking to experts (on whichever side of the spectrum), questioning them with child-like curiosity, cross questioning, redialing, at times apologising for calling again — till he was convinced.

While serving the government, he often returned home with an excited smile to tell us about a new scheme or project for the people, be it school-dress for girls, bicycles for school-children, roads being built. His conversations with us reflected his love for Bihar, its culture and its people and how being in the government was a way to give back to society, which had given him everything.

Once in late 2000, he came back home agitated and said, my life is for my party and my state. I don't love posts and I carry my resignation letter with me. I will serve my party and country till my last breath. That was his commitment and dedication to his party and to the values he was trained in.

As he realised that he was suffering from cancer, he was shaken but didn't give up. While he won the first round after surgery, the second round came as a shock. He realised that life had been shortened, but he made sure it didn't affect his work or party. Quietly and in pain after every chemotherapy session, he took the first flight to Nagpur to remain in Chhindwara for the state elections, or was up till late night for party meetings.

When time seemed to shrink even more, Papa was sad, but assured us that he would fight. I once asked him what he wished for and he said he had got everything in life; love, affection and, most of all, respect. His life was complete, with no regrets.

I think destiny's timeline was on his side. On April 3 he tweeted about his cancer and

His day would be long, but he made sure the family ate dinner together. He would ask us about our day and guide us, making sure he was not spoon feeding us. When we went to study/work away from him, he spoke on telephone every day, always concerned, listening patiently. He reminded us that one inherits the family name, but life's experiences have to be learned and earned, through toil, dedication, patience, sacrifice and failure and there were no shortcuts.

returned to Patna one final time. Over the next three days, every person who was associated with him for over half a century, paid him their respects. By the fourth day, his condition deteriorated and we flew him back to Delhi and admitted him to AIIMS, where he remained till his last breath.

Before passing away, he asked us for chocolate and ice cream, his favourites in an otherwise disciplined life.

On the 12th evening, he got up suddenly and asked to switch on the news to see the PM's rally in Patna, his *karmabhoomi*. That was the last that he saw, perhaps satisfied for all that he had done and achieved.

Thereafter, he slept and quietly passed away.

Through all the upheavals in life, his faith in the Sangh, belief in his party's ideals, excitement in nurturing young talent, and hope for a bright future for Bihar remained intact. He was a shy, soft, dedicated and courteous man. His gentleness was his strength, which was sometimes perceived as his weakness.

Now when I see the overflow of emotions, tributes, stories from across the political spectrum of how he influenced people and how he was a part of so many lives, I realise that it is Bihar that fueled him, shaped his character, gave him his sense of purpose.

While his journey continues, in this world and another, I am sure he will continue to do what he loved the most, serving his beloved country and its people.

Thank you, Papa. You were our hero. We will cherish you, always.

The writer is an Advocate on Record in the Supreme Court of India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In order to uphold its image as a neutral interpreter of the constitution and other laws, the judiciary could do its bit by declining to hear cases of certain nature that are best decided through political dialogue, or through healthy discussions in the sovereign parliament." — THE KATHMANDU POST

The no-contest in Surat and Indore

Winning unopposed may boost the BJP's strength, but diminishes democracy



K K KAILASH

WHEN THE DISTRICT election officer declared Mukesh Dalal as the winner of the Surat Lok Sabha constituency, he became the first representative to be elected to the yet-to-be-inaugurated 18th Lok Sabha. Dalal won unopposed. In competitive multiparty systems, this is a rare event, and unsurprisingly, it raised a lot of eyebrows. It was then revealed that the nomination papers of the primary challenger, the Congress candidate, were rejected. The papers of the Congress substitute candidate had been rejected earlier, and others in the fray, including the BSP nominee, withdrew their names.

A couple of days later, in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress candidate for the Indore Lok Sabha seat withdrew his candidature on the last day. However, the Surat incident couldn't be replicated as the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) dug its heels in by refusing to withdraw.

This travesty of electoral democracy raises two issues. The BJP has been winning Surat and Indore handsomely over nine Lok Sabha elections since 1989, and more often than not, the party has received more than 50 per cent of the votes. Comparative studies show that parties tamper with electoral processes when they want to win/maintain power at any cost or when the race is too close to call. However, this does not help us understand why the party attempts to do so in states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, where its standing is undisputed.

The first issue then is why does the party need to influence the process? What does it seek to achieve? Is there anything beyond winning elections that matters?

The BJP is, in many ways, a victim of its own success. It has had to invent ways to better its own attempts to stay in the front, and these manoeuvres have often pushed ethical boundaries. The Surat incident may serve the ends of the party but is not necessarily in the spirit of democracy. Travesties such as Surat are a signalling device and we need to look beyond elections to make sense of them. The party has two audiences, one internal, which includes party cadre and supporters and the other is external, which includes other political parties, their supporters, and the general public.

Various commentators have underlined over the last couple of months that the BJP has maxed out in its traditional strongholds. Consequently, the party has been setting targets like obtaining 50 per cent of votes and winning 400 seats. These goals are intended to enthrone the cadre in the states where the party faces feeble challengers, and there is nothing left to win in terms of seats. What happens in states like Gujarat, where the party has already been hitting these targets?

The thrill of dismantling a competitor without a contest can give the cadre a heady feeling. It makes the party appear commanding, forceful, and uncompromising. Being part of an organisation that is continually focused on achieving its goals gives workers a sense of purpose. This also serves to maintain the leadership status—quo as no one wants to break a winning run.

Such instances also send a message to those outside, including allies and competing parties. They help in muscle flexing, besides acting as a distracting mechanism. For the public, Congress appears weak, a party that cannot keep its flock together. Internally, the effects can be devastating; while the party is forced to spend resources on fire-fighting, it also sows seeds of distrust. It increases suspicion, as the gel that binds the party — trust — is thrown out of the window.

On the face of it, candidates voluntarily withdrawing nominations and papers being rejected on technical grounds is not an infraction of the law, especially when there are no formal complaints of wrongdoing. It is not necessarily an electoral fraud in the league of booth-capturing, intimidating voters, stuffing of ballot boxes, and impersonation. Unlike these blatant violations, where there is a clear party linkage, here there is no direct connection with the party. It can't be blamed as it has not violated any procedures.

This brings us to the second lesson. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in their magisterial *How Democracies Die* (2018), note, the contemporary weakening of democracy does not take place through overt, bold, and theatrical subversion tactics like coups but by turning democracy against itself by using the rules and institutions in place. The undermining occurs at the margins, where regulations are breached but not necessarily overthrown. There is no crossing the line; instead, there is an attempt to pay constant homage to the law.

The Surat incident extends the ongoing "lawfare" — the use of legal instruments to check political opponents. Since this battle is couched in technical language and relies on the letter of the law, it appears innocuous to most people. Moreover, the party can claim high moral ground — that it sticks to procedural correctness. However, in practice, the supposed respect for the law often violates its spirit and thus contributes to the gradual erosion of democratic norms.

For a party that has defeating the Opposition at any cost as its primary goal, any slip is a loss. A victory, without crushing the opposition and with lower numbers, will be read as a deficit. How a person is elected, unopposed or not, does not make any difference to the seats won. However, winning unopposed demonstrates the ability to utilise power without scruples. It may boost the party's strength, but diminishes democracy in the process leading to the erosion of a shared understanding of what makes institutions work.

The writer is with the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad. Views expressed are personal.



RUCHI GUPTA

The age of stupid

We are witnessing a crisis of values, not of intellect

WE LIVE IN the age of the stupid. It's not that people were not stupid before, or that we don't have brilliant people in our midst anymore. The difference is that stupidity is now mainstream and legitimate. There's not only a palpable sense of intellectual stagnation but non-serious individuals who would have earlier remained on the fringes of societal decision-making are now setting the agenda and exercising power. It is important to explore how this has happened.

Institutions of knowledge have been traditional sources of intellectual authority in society. Such institutions attracted the best and the brightest and provided a platform for collaboration and intellectual advancement. However, there has been a decline in the quality of institutional leadership across sectors and geographies. This decline has more to do with lack of integrity and moral courage than deficits in intellectual ability — but the resultant compromises have had an inevitable impact on the intellectual output of these institutions.

Moreover, institutions as a whole have struggled to keep pace with the rapid changes in society, in part due to rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic processes that have made them appear insular and unrepresentative. These factors have led to a widespread erosion of trust in institutions and loss of institutional credibility.

In this vacuum of intellectual authority, social media — with its global reach and assiduously value-blind approach to content — has powered the rise of a new class of in-

dividuals who are able to shape public opinion without necessarily having the depth of knowledge or experience expected from intellectual leaders. Serious engagement with the world and its constraints pushes thinking forward; however, the discrete, ad-hoc, and transient nature of social media requires not deep thinking but constant visibility. In any case, most of these individuals are not renegades looking to stand up to institutions or create a counter culture but social media influencers telling people what to buy, do and think. This modern-day evangelism has suffused our discourse with the gospel of stupid.

While this may describe our world right now, the question is what about our society has led to such a precipitous decline in the quality of institutional leadership. One aspect of this is the erosion of shared values which has created a pervasive atmosphere of moral relativism in which there is no clear demarcation between what is right and wrong. This moral relativism has been accompanied by the concomitant veneration of an ends-justify-means culture, in which wrongdoing is not only free from societal reprobation but is actually admired as long as it leads to success. Closely related to this is the sense that leadership positions are merely a vehicle for personal prestige and enrichment instead of imposing any responsibility for maintaining standards or for the greater collective good. These shifting societal mores have made opportunism, insularity and spinelessness virtually cost-free. The

rise of partisanship has further dealt a blow to the intellectual foundations of our society. In a world where everything is viewed through the lens of "us vs them", the aim of winning power takes precedence over intellectual honesty. This has led to a decline in the quality of discourse and a lack of internal questioning within partisan groups.

Given this context of moral relativism and partisanship, the way institutions select and promote leaders almost always leads to sub-par leadership. Institutional leaders are not chosen for their brilliance or moral courage but are selected through a process or nominated in an exercise of delegated power. In the first instance, those who excel at navigating internal power structures or manipulating institutional processes are often deal-makers not big thinkers. Those who get picked for leadership in a form of delegated power must necessarily stay within the confines of that power structure and are thus de-facto status quoists. Power factions necessarily choose leaders who are focused on propagating a particular point of view instead of engaging with multiple perspectives, thus lowering the intellectual bar. This has led to the rise of illiberalism, the suppression of dissent, and has contributed to intellectual stagnation in our society.

The second question is what has enabled the entry of opportunists, charlatans and hucksters into our public discourse. It is true that the rise of infotainment, the fragmentation of media, and the increasing po-

larisation of our politics have all contributed to a situation where stupid ideas by genuinely or willfully stupid people can quickly gain traction and influence. However, this is not just an organic process. Real money and power is backing this through creator funds and delegated power in a bid to consolidate their own money and power. In each of these instances, there is no value judgement on the quality of what is being said or done as long as it is serving the instrumental purpose — increased engagement or partisanship — of the backing authority. Moreover, traditional sources of intellectual authority have lost credibility and gatekeeping power. This has made it possible to have real careers on the back of nonsense while also giving nonsense mainstream legitimacy in society.

These issues are not insurmountable, yet we do not see a concerted effort from the powers-that-be to fix them. This is because there is a feeling among some political and corporate powers that the age of stupid can be instrumentally harnessed for their own agenda. They believe that as long as the world at large is engrossed in stupidity, their own endeavours can continue without interference; others believe they can ride the wave of stupidity to shore up their own interests. This tells us that ultimately, this surfeit of stupidity is not a crisis of intellect but a crisis of values.

The writer is the executive director of Future of India Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MARKET, NOT CASINO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Froth and risk' (IE, May 16). New entrants in the market look at Futures and Options as an easy way to stockpile money. This is a misconception. Financial influencers, often not registered with SEBI, spread misinformation and thus confuse gullible traders, who blindly follow the advice to end up in heavy losses. SEBI should take all necessary measures to encourage long term investment practices so that the stock market is not seen as a casino but a place where informed financial decisions would help in wealth creation while supporting fundamentally strong companies by new-generation investors.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

FOLLOW DUE PROCESS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'NewsClick's founder steps out of Tihar after SC says arrest invalid' (IE, May 16). The Supreme Court reaffirmed the importance of procedural safeguards in the Constitution to ensure arrests are not arbitrary. The purpose of ensuring that the details are communicated in writing, is to allow the accused an opportunity to oppose remand and seek bail. In the absence of formal communication, the accused is at a disadvantage. Both the remand and a supporting HC judgment were quashed only because of the sanctity attached to due process. It's unfortunate that it took the accused almost eight months to get his arrest declared illegal. The delay is a telling statement on lower judiciary.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Failure behind success' (IE, May 14). Today, career choices are based not on individual interest, but on cultivating interest in the same areas for all students. Where do students' genuine areas of interest go? They live in fear that if they don't fulfil expectations, they will upset those they love. Any expression of interests that deviate from the status quo face the danger of being met with laughter and scorn. Menaka Guruswamy with her work in the repeal of Section 377, Birubala Rambha with her work against witch hunting are poignant examples that show one needs to be in the bureaucracy to affect change. Parents must change their approach and guide children as they find their own path would.

Kanika Lakhara, Bhillwara

VOTERS AND BJP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Four phases, six takeaways' (IE, May 16). The detailed comparative analysis of voter turnout in the four phases of 2024 Lok Sabha Election has concluded that there is no national pattern. However, the conclusion attributed high turnout in Karnataka and Telangana to the INC's guarantee. In that case, how does one explain the low turnout in the face of "Modi ki guarantee" across India and particularly the states where BJP is in power like UP and MP? Is it a case of anti-incumbency?

LR Murmu, New Delhi



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Draft Digital Competition Bill, and why Big Tech opposes it

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK
 NEW DELHI, MAY 16

THE LAST date for public comments on the draft Digital Competition Bill, 2024 passed on Wednesday.

Taking a leaf out of the European regulatory handbook, the Bill contains provisions which could stop tech giants from self-preferencing their own services and using data gathered from one company to benefit another group company. It also sets presumptive norms to curb anti-competitive practices before they actually take place, with heavy penalties — to the tune of billions of dollars — for violations.

Key provisions

Predictive regulation

Currently, India follows an *ex post facto* antitrust framework, regulating for market abuse after it takes place, under the Competition Act, 2002. One of the biggest criticisms of this has been that regulating after the incidence of market abuse is simply too delayed — by the time the offending company has been penalised, market dynamics change to the detriment of smaller

competitors. The draft Bill contains provisions to change this with an *ex ante* framework instead, which foresees potential harms that can arise out of antitrust issues and prescribes pre-determined no-go areas. Due to the complex world of digital markets, which are ever-growing with increasing interlinkages between various offerings made by a single company, a forward-looking, preventive, and presumptive law is crucial to curb anti-competitive practices in the space.

Significant entities

The Bill proposes that for certain “core digital services” like search engines and social media sites, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) should designate companies as “Systematically Significant Digital Enterprise (SSDE)” depending on various quantitative and qualitative parameters. These include:

- If in the last three financial years, its turnover in India is not less than Rs 4,000 crore; or its global turnover is not less than \$30 billion; or,
- Its gross merchandise value in India is not less than Rs 16,000 crore; or,
- Its global market capitalisation is not less than \$75 billion; or,
- The core digital service provided by these companies should also have at least 10% of their global turnover.

crore end users, or 10,000 business users.

The CCI also has discretionary powers to designate entities not falling under these parameters as SSDEs, if it believes that they have a significant presence in any given core digital service. SSDEs will be prohibited from engaging in practices such as self-preferencing, anti-steering, and restricting third party applications. If they violate these requirements, they can be fined up to 10% of their global turnover.

Associate Digital Enterprises

Understanding the role that data collected by one company of a major technology group can play in benefiting other group companies, the Bill proposes to designate associate digital enterprises (ADEs). ADEs would have the same obligations as SSDEs, depending on the level of their involvement with the core digital service offered by the main company. For instance, Google Maps or YouTube can be, in theory, designated as ADEs of Google Search depending on the level of data-sharing between these entities and Google Search.

Criticism from Big Tech

Naturally, there has been significant re-

sistance to this Bill in its current form, from big tech companies, industry bodies funded by tech companies, and boutique consultancies hoping to onboard tech clients.

For Big Tech, an *ex ante* framework with strict prescriptive norms could lead to a significant compliance burden, and shift focus from innovation and research to ensuring that companies do not presumptively engage in any anti-competitive practice. As a result, the tech giants are calling for the current competition law to be strengthened rather than moving towards an *ex ante* framework.

An industry executive told *The Indian Express* that because of the stringent requirements of the European Union’s Digital Markets Act, which came into force fully earlier this year, there has been an increase of 4,000% in the time it takes to find things via Google search. India’s new regulatory framework can lead to similar outcomes, tech executives fear.

Moreover, if the law were to go into effect as is, a company like Apple would have to allow iPhone users to download apps from a third-party app store, over Apple’s own store — something that the company has lobbied

against vehemently. While Android has a relatively open nature “sideloading” of apps, Google too has advocated against this, primarily citing potential security ramifications of allowing third party downloads.

Companies are also understood to be concerned about the broad definition — both quantitative and qualitative — of who an SSDE could be. Unlike the EU’s DMA which specifically names the “gatekeeper” entities, in India’s case, CCI’s discretion will prevail, something that companies believe could lead to arbitrary decision making that could also potentially impact start-ups. Big Tech companies are claiming that cutting down on data-sharing could also impact smaller businesses who rely on their platforms to reach a big target audience.

Need for digital competition

The law comes on the back of Big Tech’s long history of anti-competitive offences. Only last year, Google was fined Rs 1,337 crore by the CCI for its anti-competitive conduct in the Android ecosystem. Moreover, in the last decade or so, most tech-related innovation has come from within the stables of a handful of American Big Tech giants like Google, Apple, Amazon, and Meta.

Officials believe that this is due to the high market barriers for new entrants in the sector. In the online space, once a company corners a significant portion of the market, their product becomes the default way to access that particular service, with rivals finding it increasingly difficult to challenge their dominance.

Take, for instance WhatsApp, which is owned by Meta, Facebook’s parent company. In India, it has a market share of more than 97% among messaging app users — it is pretty much the default messaging app everyone is expected to use. While there is always space for niche online products — users who care about their privacy may choose Signal over WhatsApp, and a search engine like DuckDuckGo over Google Search — they do not become the norm.

While smaller companies did benefit from the cheap advertising that Google and Facebook provided them when compared to traditional media, this has also fuelled a surveillance-based digital advertising industry, which is always making inferences about users behind the scenes and across platforms they access. Government officials believe all these cons will be better addressed via the *ex ante* framework proposed by the draft Bill.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

WHAT THE NEW RIGHT-WING DUTCH GOVERNMENT PLANS TO DO

AFTER MONTHS of negotiations, Dutch ultranationalist Geert Wilders and his coalition partners have struck a deal to form the government. Here is what they plan to do.



Geert Wilders will not become prime minister himself. Reuters

On immigration

The coalition aims to have the strictest admittance policy for asylum seekers in EU, and will request an opt-out of common EU rules for migration. Foreigners who have already been denied asylum in another EU country will be sent away immediately, family reunifications will be limited, and refugees and asylum seekers will no longer be prioritised for housing. Within EU, the government will strive for stricter border controls and deals with non-EU countries to take in migrants. Labour migration will be curbed, as will the flow of foreign students to Dutch universities. Workers from outside the EU who do not have specific expertise will need work permits, and recruiting agencies will face stricter regulation.

On energy

The coalition aims to expand offshore natural gas extraction and nuclear energy production as part of plans to reduce the Netherlands’ dependence on “unreliable countries”. It will stick to internationally agreed climate goals, but will not add any national restrictions on top of them. Plans under the previous government for an additional national carbon emissions tax for industry will be scrapped.

On agriculture, environment

Farmers won’t be forced to reduce their livestock, a move by the previous regime to cut back nitrogen oxide emissions. The coalition will strive to ease EU environmental regulations for farmers, and domestic regulations will not be made stricter than what EU laws prescribe. Diesel for farmers will become cheaper, and the maximum

speed on highways will be increased to 130 kmph after being reduced to 100 kmph in 2020 to fight nitrogen pollution.

On taxes, spending cuts

Energy and income taxes will be lowered, while levies on share buybacks by listed companies, announced late last year, will be scrapped. A mandatory user contribution for healthcare procedures will be halved by 2027, and childcare subsidies will be increased. Day care will be made nearly free. Plans will be financed with 14 billion euros in spending cuts through 2028, including through a freeze of government salaries. Unemployment welfare will be limited to 18 months.

International stance

Political and military support to Ukraine will be sustained, and the coalition will make it legally binding to spend at least 2% of Dutch gross domestic product on defence, in line with NATO agreements. Spending on foreign development aid will be cut by 2.4 billion euros. EU enlargement will not be supported unless all relevant criteria are fulfilled. The coalition aims to move the Dutch embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

REUTERS

EXPLAINED GEOPOLITICS & STRATEGY

Xi, Putin, and the world

Putin is on his 19th visit to China since becoming Russia’s leader. The West expects Xi to nudge Putin to end the war in Ukraine. India is watching the bonhomie between Moscow and Beijing closely



SHUBHAJIT ROY

PRESIDENTS VLADIMIR Putin and Xi Jinping met at the historic Great Hall of the People, seat of power of the Chinese Communist Party, on Thursday, where a welcome ceremony for Russia’s leader included a guard of honour by China’s People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

Calling Xi “my dear friend”, Putin said it is of fundamental importance that relations between Russia and China are “not opportunistic”, and “are not directed against anyone”. Xi said the China-Russia friendship was “everlasting”, and had “become a model for a new type of international relations”. The two leaders later attended a concert to celebrate 75 years of diplomatic ties.

Putin’s two-day visit to China comes when Russia has taken a firm grip on the course of the war in Ukraine. Xi has just returned from a tour of Europe where he met with the President of France, as well as the leaders of Hungary and Serbia, both of whom are friends with Putin.

China, Russia, and the war

China and Russia signed a “no-limits” strategic partnership only days before Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. More than two years later, Russia controls large swathes of Ukrainian territory, and is currently in the midst of a successful push both in the northeastern Kharkiv region as well as in the south of the country.

The Chinese role in the war has been a major concern for the West, led by the United States. This was forcefully flagged by Secretary of State Antony J Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen during separate visits to China last month.

Blinken said China was the “top supplier” of dual-use items, which have both civilian and military applications — Russia, he said, “would struggle to sustain its assault on



China’s President Xi Jinping (right) and Russia’s President Vladimir Putin exchange documents after a signing ceremony in Beijing on Thursday. AP/PTI

Ukraine without China’s support”. The US believes China is supplying tech that Russia is using to build missiles, tanks, and other battlefield weapons.

Russian imports of machine tools, computer chips, and other dual-use items from China have increased significantly. The sales of Chinese logistics equipment like lorries (to transport troops) and excavators (to dig trenches) to Russia have increased by four to seven times since the war began.

In his talks with both France’s President Emmanuel Macron and EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen, Xi pledged that China would not sell arms to Russia, and would control the flow of dual-use goods to its military.

Hosting Putin a week later in Beijing, Xi reaffirmed the friendship between their two countries. He said he had met with Putin “more than 40 times”, and they had stayed in close touch, ensuring sound, steady, and smooth development of the relationship. This visit is Putin’s 19th trip to China since 2000, when he became Russia’s leader, and his first overseas visit since he began a new six-year term that will keep him in power

until at least 2030.

The West expects Xi to use his leverage with Putin to end the war. While signing a statement deepening the strategic relationship with Russia, Xi said on Thursday that both sides agreed that a political settlement to the Ukraine crisis was the “right direction”.

Putin, who would want to end the war when the momentum is with him, said he was grateful to China for trying to solve the crisis, and added that he would brief Xi on the situation in Ukraine, where Russian forces were advancing on several fronts.

Sino-Russian relationship

Last year, a White House spokesperson had said that the China-Russia relationship was a “marriage of convenience”, and the American National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan had referred to a “cartoonish notion that these two countries have become unbreakable allies”.

There is a history to the development of Sino-Russian ties, and the US has had a role to play in its evolution. The relationship between China and the Soviet Union did not begin well. When

Chairman Mao Zedong visited Moscow after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, he was made to wait for weeks for a meeting with Joseph Stalin. Mao is said to have been put in a remote dacha outside the capital where, according to an article in the *Smithsonian* magazine, “the sole recreational facility was a broken table tennis table”.

During the Cold War, China and the USSR were rivals, competing for control of the global communist movement. Tensions between the countries rose dangerously in the early 1960s, and they fought a brief border war in 1969. The relationship began to improve after the death of Mao in 1976, but remained frosty right until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

In the post Cold War-era, economic relations have formed the “new strategic basis” for Sino-Russian relations. China became Russia’s biggest trading partner, and the largest Asian investor in Russia. China views Russia as a powerhouse of raw material and a valuable market for its consumer goods.

The West’s hostile approach towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought Moscow closer to Beijing. India has always felt it was the West that pushed Russia into a tighter embrace of China.

Critical concerns for India

For New Delhi, the Russia-China defence axis throws up critical questions.

About 60-70% of Indian defence supplies come from Russia, and New Delhi needs regular and reliable supplies especially at a time when Indian and Chinese soldiers are locked in a standoff at the border for the last four years.

Many western analysts have cautioned India about a scenario in which Russia becomes a “junior partner” of China. At the same time, India would not want the Russian defence industry to suffer as a result of western sanctions — at least in the short-to-medium term.

What would Russia do if war were to break out between India and China? The Soviet Union’s position during the 1962 war was not particularly supportive of India. Moscow did extend its support during the 1971 war — however, this is neither 1962 or 1971, and Vladimir Putin’s Russia is not the old Soviet Union.

This Word Means | Sickout (in Aviation & Other Sectors)

Reporting sick en masse has emerged as a potent tool of industrial action

SUKALP SHARMA
 NEW DELHI, MAY 16

IN RECENT weeks, operations of two Indian airlines, Vistara and Air India Express, suffered disruptions after pilots and senior cabin crew called in sick *en masse*. Over the years, “sickouts” — employees in key operations roles reporting sick *en masse* or in a coordinated manner, giving very little time to managements to take mitigation measures — have emerged as a potent instrument of industrial action to disrupt businesses without formally going on strike.

The aviation industry has been especially vulnerable to this collective bargaining tool employed by critical staff, but other sectors too have been impacted.

Weaker unions, fewer strikes

Strikes and sickouts both involve em-

ployees refusing to work in order to force managements to address their grievances and consider their demands. However, a strike is a formal and legal action involving notices, procedures, and recognised employees’ unions and associations, while a sickout is a seemingly unconstrained, swift, and usually eleventh-hour action.

For a number of reasons, trade unions in many parts of the world have lost the sympathy of regulators, the public, and even some sections of workers. Governments have sometimes actively restricted the space for their operation, bringing laws and regulations to weaken labour unions and their collective bargaining potential.

In the absence of supportive legislation in many countries, workers in the private sector are unable to organise themselves into formal unions. In organisations that do have unions, some categories of employees may not be allowed to join them or to par-

ticipate in strikes, and the management and/or government may refuse to recognise, or may derecognise a union.

Unions may get excessively politicised, and rival unions may squabble among themselves. Leaders of unions may be victimised, and distrust among workers, unions, and the management may make the industrial environment toxic.

The upshot of this situation has been a reduction in the number of formal strikes and labour agitations across sectors in many parts of the world.

Growing trend of sickouts

Sickouts are not new. But with formal strikes becoming infrequent or impossible, they have become a more frequently exercised option in recent years.

Like strikes, sickout are usually the most effective when the participants are in key operational roles, and their absence can

cripple the company’s working. In aviation, therefore, sickouts are mostly used by pilots, cabin crew, and engineering staff, without whom aircraft can’t get off the ground.

It follows that sickouts are most often a tool of protest by specific sections of employees who have their own grievances and demands. It may be difficult for the disgruntled group to rally the support of other employees — the agitation by Vistara pilots for better pay for example, did not elicit much sympathy from their colleagues in other roles who were making far less money.

In some cases though, it is possible that the grievances may be widespread enough for wider sickout action by employees in multiple departments.

Sickouts make it difficult for managements to take punitive action against agitating employees because it may be difficult to legally establish that all those who called in sick did so with malicious intent

and without reasonable cause. Also, sickouts are organised informally, making it difficult to pinpoint their leaders.

Sickouts beyond aviation

Mass sick leave is not unheard of in Indian aviation. Before the recent actions, a sizable number of aircraft technicians and cabin crew at IndiGo went on mass sick leave in 2022. In 2013, engineers of the now defunct Kingfisher Airlines went on mass sick leave. In 2012, Air India and Kingfisher pilots had called in sick *en masse* over different sets of demands. In 2009, over 300 pilots of Jet Airways went on mass sick leave to protest against the airline’s management.

But sickouts have been used as a tool of collective bargaining by workers in other sectors and other countries as well. In many instances, the workers seemingly resorted to sickouts because they were not allowed to strike work legally — which would be the

case for workers in sectors classified as essential services.

In April 2020, scores of Amazon workers in key departments like warehousing and technology in the United States called in sick over the company’s allegedly inadequate response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its alleged punitive action against workers who spoke out. Similar action by workers was witnessed at other retail majors like Target and Whole Foods around the same time.

There have also been a number of instances of sickouts by teachers, healthcare workers, and other essential services workers in various countries over the past few years. Sickouts in 2016 by a large number of public school teachers in Detroit to protest against poor working conditions led to nearly all schools in the city being shut.

LONGER VERSION ON

indianexpress.com/explained



There are few ironclad rules of diplomacy, but to one there is no exception. When an official reports that talks were useful, it can safely be concluded that nothing was accomplished

John Kenneth Galbraith

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

— Rammath Goenka

PRIORITISE STRATEGIC INTEREST AND HOLD GROUND ON CHABAHAR

INDIA'S pact with Iran and Afghanistan to facilitate transit of passengers and goods through the Chabahar port in Iran has triggered a threat of US sanctions against India. A US state department spokesperson said the countries doing business with Iran were opening themselves to the risk of sanctions. The warning came despite the fact that the Trump administration had exempted the Chabahar port's operations from sanctions in 2018. India's external affairs minister S Jaishankar rightly pointed out that the pact benefits not only the three contracting parties, but serves a much wider strategic purpose. He said India will communicate with and convince others on how the project benefits everyone. India, Iran and Afghanistan have been working on the Chabahar port since 2003, when the three countries signed a memorandum.

India needs to stand its ground on the pact, as it offers significant strategic advantages by providing a new trade route to western and central Asia and beyond via Iran and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan and countering China's plan to develop Pakistan's Gwadar port as a major regional hub. The worsening relations between India and Pakistan have seen projects such as the Iran-Pakistan-India and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipelines go into cold storage. Pakistan has obstructed India's trade with central Asia using its land routes. It is, therefore, imperative that India develops an alternative trade route to the energy-rich central Asia by going around, notwithstanding the US warning.

India has shown strategic independence in its foreign policy. It had disregarded US sanctions on Russia and imported huge amounts of Russian oil, so much so that Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran to become India's largest crude supplier. India also continues to import arms and ammunition from Russia while the US sanctions are in place. It has been boldly pursuing its interests. It knows well that the US would not take any step that would push India into a corner and force it to work with greater intensity towards realising the BRICS goals of developing a common currency and easing trade among the five partners of the formation—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. India's Chabahar decision is a calculated move to counter China and register its presence in western and central Asia. It should stick to it.

ANDHRA PARTIES SHOULD DOUSE FIRES THEY LIT

THE post-poll violence in Andhra Pradesh appears to have caught the police off-guard. Though security arrangements were made keeping in view the highly inflammable political environment, the fact that violence erupted in several places not only on polling day but also continued the next day points at a clear failure. Thus far, at least 300 people have been detained and dozens arrested in connection with the ugly incidents that unfolded in the Palnadu region, Tirupati, Tadipatri and other places.

The confrontation between activists of the opposition TDP and the ruling YSRC was waiting to happen. We have earlier highlighted how leaders from both the sides have been using provocative language and warned it could lead to fights. Take the series of incidents in Palnadu. It is well-known that the region has a history of factional feuds. With warring leaders fighting for political power, the elections served as a flash-point. It is obvious the factions were well-prepared, going by how they fought pitched battles with Molotov cocktails. The police unearthed knives, petrol bombs and country-made bombs in Macherla mandal, indicating that everything was pre-planned. The assault on the TDP candidate in Tirupati also does not look like a spur-of-the-moment act. Fortunately, no one has died. One wonders how mobs could gain control of areas in the presence of police personnel.

The ECI has rightly taken a serious view of the incidents and summoned the state chief secretary and the DGP to personally explain the situation. After hearing their versions, it suspended the SPs of Palnadu and Anantapur, and transferred the district collector of Palnadu and the SP of Tirupati. Besides ordering departmental enquires, it directed that a special investigation team probe the violence and submit a report. On the state's request, the commission further instructed the home ministry to retain 25 Central Armed Police Force companies in the state for a fortnight after the counting of votes.

It is a welcome intervention. Political parties, on their part, need to appeal to their followers to exercise restraint. It is tragic that they have not yet come forward to actively douse the fires, and instead seem busy pointing fingers at each other. Stringent action must be taken against the perpetrators, not just the officials, and an example be made of them.

QUICK TAKE

IMPROVE HUMAN RIGHTS PANEL

THE UN-affiliated Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions has deferred the accreditation of India's National Human Rights Commission for the second year on the trot. The global body's previous report had cited the lack of transparency in appointing NHRC members, the appointment of police officers to oversee human rights probes, and the lack of gender and minority representation on the panel as reasons for recommending the deferral. The NHRC, a statutory body, has been enfeebled by successive administrations. But it is essential in a developing, diverse country like ours. It must be beyond reproach and given the muscle to pursue rights cases unfettered.

MILITARY diplomacy has been an integral part of a country's overall diplomacy for around 170 years—since Britain sent a general to its embassy in Paris in 1856. He was later attached to the French army's higher command during the Crimean War of 1853-56 and other military campaigns.

In recent times, a military or defence attaché, also called a defence advisor, has become a permanent feature at embassies in most countries. The position is always held by a serving military officer supported by other officers, depending on bilateral relations and strategic requirements. India maintains separate Army, Navy and Air Force attachés in big countries with which it maintains defence ties. The officer and his deputies are given diplomatic status.

Primarily, military diplomacy uses military assets and engagements to achieve strategic objectives in foreign policy. For a country like India, with a long military history and growing geopolitical interests, it is imperative to calibrate its military engagements and develop leverages for promoting national interest, in a rapidly evolving international multipolar global order.

The main functions of a defence attaché is to gather information, report on developments in the defence sector, liaison with the defence forces of the host country, handle defence-related exchanges, coordinate defence procurement for India's armed forces, and keep track of advances in military technologies. India also provides training to military officers from many countries who attend courses at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun, the National Defence College, Delhi, and the Defence Services Staff College, Wellington. The defence attaché coordinates such training programmes.

It is said they also are a part of a country's espionage network to gather intelligence. These functions are part of the international legal framework of diplomatic relations. During the Cold War, there were instances of defence attachés being expelled by the US and the Soviet Union. There was an incident of an American military attaché who was shot and killed in East Germany. He was photographing a military installation, which led to tit-for-tat expulsions of military attachés.

Assisting the ambassador with crucial inputs on developments in his domain of work and file reports to the Ministry of Defence in Delhi are also integral parts of the defence attaché's role. The attaché also plays a crucial role in coordinating Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief, whose primary actors overseas are the Navy and Air Force. The other overseas re-

India's renewed thrust on military diplomacy is significant. Given our growing geopolitical interests, it is imperative to calibrate engagements and develop leverages to promote national interest

SAFEGUARDING INDIAN INTERESTS IN FOREIGN LANDS

PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

Former Secretary in the MEA and former High Commissioner to Bangladesh; Visiting Fellow at the ORF and a founding Director of DeepStrat, a think tank



SOURAV ROY

sponsibility is deployment for the UN Peacekeeping Operations, for which deployment is from the Indian Army.

India will be sending new defence attachés to Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Mozambique and Djibouti, the last a strategically located country in the Horn of Africa that overlooks the crucial maritime route through the Gulf of Aden. Djibouti also hosts China's first overseas military base. India's defence attaché will be the second one after China. With limited resources to deploy, it would be necessary to trim some defence attaché's offices in select missions and divert these posts to Africa.

India's engagement with African nations is growing. China made substantive investments under its BRI in Africa, enlarging its influence in the continent. India has cham-

pioned the cause of the Global South and ensured the entry of the African Union in the G20 at the Delhi Summit, bringing in this 55-member nation pan-African organisation as a permanent member. India's investment in Africa has reached \$98 billion and trade turnover is around \$100 billion.

Apart from African nations, Armenia in Central Asia will get a new Indian defence attaché. Armenia has emerged as an important buyer of military equipment from India. Yerevan has acquired the PINAKA multi barrel rocket launchers, anti-tank missiles, rockets and anti-drone systems from India. These acquisitions have occurred because of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Philippines has bought the Brahmos missiles from India under a \$375-million

SUMMER OF DISCONTENT IN THE HINDI HEARTLAND

IF there is one striking difference between the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, it's the lack of a wave—be it a Modi wave, NDA wave, INDIA wave or even a Mandir wave. With the absence of a national narrative, local candidates and local issues are determining choices in Uttar Pradesh this time.

So far, we have travelled to 14 Lok Sabha constituencies that voted in the first four phases—from west UP's Ghaziabad, Meerut, Bijnor, Nagina, Saharanpur, Kairana and Muzaffarnagar towards Etawah, Kheri, Dhaurahra, Kannauj, Badayun, Mainpuri and Hathras. On average, we covered two Vidhan Sabha areas in each parliamentary constituency.

One of the most prominent issues across castes was the agrarian crisis. Even those of the Brahmin community who supported the BJP consistently spoke about their struggles as farmers. One of the specific issues all farmers faced was the menace of stray cattle that destroyed crops in fields.

Many farmers are clueless about how to deal with their male cattle, essentially an economic burden on farmers who are dealing with growing financial distress. The state government has unsuccessfully attempted to build cow sheds to address the issue. The losses are substantially higher than the quarterly cash transfer of ₹500 a month from the central government under the Kisan Samman Nidhi.

Add to this the shrinkflation in urea—sacks have become smaller while the price has remained constant. Meanwhile, the state-mandated price for sugarcane has grown by only about ₹45 a quintal in the last seven years, lower than under previous regimes. This has resulted in the drifting away of several non-Yadav, non-Jat agrarian OBCs from the BJP in west UP. This includes castes like Lodhi Rajputs, Kurmis, Kushwahas and Sainis, who are mostly marginal farmers.

Despite the Rashtriya Lok Dal's entry into the NDA, in seats like Kairana, Muzaffarnagar, Aligarh and Agra, Jat voters haven't shifted to the BJP-led bloc to the extent hoped for. The ripples from the historic 13-month-long farmers' movement of 2020-21 continue to impact Jat voters, who remain suspicious of the alliance. In many places, the lower turnout is a result of core BJP supporters voting in fewer numbers.

Another factor is the massive Rajput panchayats held in Meerut, Kairana and Muzaffarnagar against the BJP. This was

in response to a couple of speeches made allegedly against the community by BJP leaders. Many also accused the BJP of "keeping silent" when the caste name Gurjar was inscribed on the statue of Mihir Bhoj, who they claim was a Rajput.

While there is some disillusionment with the ruling party, the opposition INDIA bloc has not been able to win over these communities. As a result, voter enthusiasm has been minimal.



Many communities in UP are disgruntled with the BJP this time. Some Dalits and Muslims are voting tactically against the party, whereas some other communities are opting to sit it out. One shouldn't underestimate the BJP's strong cadre base among all communities

What is also evident is a simmering anger over inflation and unemployment. The anger was further fuelled when the UP Constable Recruitment and Promotion 2024 examination, for which over 48 lakh aspirants vied, was postponed after paper leaks. Repeated incidents of paper leaks under the Modi government have increased despondency among young voters. The recently unveiled Agniveer scheme has proven to be another wet blanket.

There is another concern among Dalits and Scheduled Castes. This March 25, BJP MP Anant Kumar Hegde from Karnataka called for "rewriting" the Indian Constitution, which would not be possible without winning 400 of the 543 seats. At least three other BJP candidates have openly stated

the same intention. The videos of their statements have gone viral. So the BJP's slogan of 'Abki baar, 400 paar' is causing a growing insecurity about reservation. This includes non-Jat SC communities, large sections of which have been voting for the BJP in the past few years.

Another factor that is proving to be a dampener is that BSP and SP couldn't ally this time. In 2019, because of the SP-BSP alliance, on many seats that didn't have a BSP candidate there was a shift of Dalit votes to the BJP. This time, there is a visible shift of some of these voters to the INDIA bloc, essentially looking to vote for the strongest candidate against the BJP.

Even Muslims are looking to consolidate in favour of the strongest candidate against the BJP. In Nagina, there is a strong consolidation of both Muslims and Dalits in favour of Chandrashekhar Azad from the Azad Samaj Party. This is because the Muslims here were looking for an alternative to the SP, owing to its silence on the community's issues.

As one moves away from west UP, it seems Akhilesh Yadav's PDA slogan—P for pichhde or backward classes, D for Dalits, and A for alpsankhyak or minorities—has rung a bell. Many voters are also calling it 'Pandit harao abhiyan' (Defeat the Brahmins campaign).

Women in rural areas are upset with the lack of allocation under the PM Awaas Yojana. Village after village, they were keen to show their abysmal living conditions. Many who got gas cylinders for the first time because of the much-touted Ujjwala Yojana are back to using clay stoves as they can't afford to refill their cylinders.

Yet, despite the growing discontent among various communities, it would be wrong to underestimate the BJP. Numerically significant castes like Brahmins and Baniyas have consolidated behind the BJP across UP. The Rajput anger doesn't seem to have much of an impact in central and eastern UP. The BJP still has a strong cadre base across castes.

As one voter in Kairana said, "The voters are silent; that could mean anything." (Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Preventive measures

Ref: Let's be prepared to face extreme weather events (May 16). The editorial has aptly pointed out the need for periodical inspection of high rise buildings and hoardings that prove deadly during nature's fury. Taking the recent death toll in Mumbai as a lesson, ruling establishments in other cities should take preventive measures.

R Sridharan, Chennai

Healthy living

Ref: Can nurture trump nature on genetic risks (May 16). It is known to all that genetic factors are as responsible for early deaths as the modern lifestyle. We should try to mitigate the high genetic risk factor of shorter life expectancy with healthy living habits.

Jaydeb Das, email

Invalid arrest

Ref: NewsClick editor gets bail at last (May 16). The observation of the Supreme Court, by quashing the arrest, achieved the final hope of Prabir Purkayastha. The enforcing authority knows very well that a detainee must be told the grounds for being jailed, failing which the arrest would be invalid. Yet, this happens often. The process of arrest may just be an assignment to authorities, but this is a heavy blow to the detainee until he is proven innocent.

Kaliappan Palaniswami, Salem

Proudly Indian

Ref: Centre grants first set of citizenship to 14 people (May 16). It is heartening that India has lived up to the promise it took in 2019. The 14 individuals that have been granted citizenship can now proudly proclaim they are Indians.

K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai

No support?

Ref: Will give outside support to INDIA bloc, says Mamata (May 16). Indian political history over the years has made one strongly believe that the assurance of outside support to a government by any party is as good as no support. The INDIA bloc seems to be on a shaky wicket.

S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Growth neglected

Ref: Govts need to balance welfare with growth (May 16). With many welfare schemes, many taxpayers feel the budget is not used properly as growth seems to be neglected. It is true that every government should fulfill basic amenities of food, housing, healthcare and quality education. But it shouldn't be based on religion, caste and community for vote bank.

Jayaprakash Reddy, Nalgonda

Singapore Slings Into a Wong Future

The new PM has 'China challenges' to heed

Singapore's new prime minister Lawrence Wong has had a lengthy run-up to his current job as the Lee family continues its stewardship of the island nation. The improbable star of the developing world has reached dizzying heights of mass affluence because of its open economy, committed bureaucracy and clean politics. In this, it is a veritable poster boy for both developing and developed economies. Wong inherits these strengths, but he also faces China-US decoupling that could become a hurdle to future growth. Singapore's dominant ethnic group is Chinese, while the US is the biggest investor in the country. The city built itself as a global financial powerhouse while China put the squeeze on Hong Kong. Now, China is a bigger force in the region, with deeper economic integration and political interests in all of its neighbours. Wong will have to chart a course clearly distinct from his predecessor Lee Hsien Loong who courted US capital and the technology that accompanied it.

Another shift in outlook is the nature of politics, tightly controlled by three generations of the family of Lee Kuan Yew, the founding father of the modern Singaporean state. Its unique politics was forged by an effort to keep racial power dynamics at bay. But with an ageing population, the city will have to review its immigration policy and cannot keep itself permanently insulated from alternate claims on power. Here, too, Chinese businessmen, seeking a freer business environment than at home, are gaining in voice. Since Singapore cannot reasonably turn down TikTok's request to set up its regional headquarters in the city, Wong is moving towards the geopolitical fault line.

Wong must also get a handle on Singapore's lack of scale. The city of 6 mn has to push the frontiers of technology and finance to stay ahead in the standard-of-living game. This will become more difficult as the rest of Asia, with incredibly bigger economic heft, applies some of the tools that propelled Singapore to becoming one of the costliest cities to live in.

Make Pilgrimages Blessed Experiences

The Char Dham Yatra — comprising Puri, Rameswaram, Dwarka and Badrinath — which began on May 10, broke a record on Day 1. More than 29,000 pilgrims visited Kedarnath, part of the Chota Char Dham Yatra circuit, clogging the mountain roads for hours. Many pilgrims were forced to return to base even before starting their journey. Reacting to angry crowds, the Uttarakhand government said it's looking at solutions and is planning to create a Dharmik Yatra Authority to regulate the yatra, which includes three other shrines, and other pilgrimages such as those in the Kanwar Yatra circuit.

While the government's proposal is welcome, its past actions — or rather, inactions — raise concerns about its intentions. In 2023, CM Pushkar Singh Dhami, under pressure from priests and tour operators, rescinded his decision to impose a daily limit on the number of pilgrims just a day before it was to be operationalised. How Dhami plans to resist such lobbying again remains to be seen. Last year, the state constituted a committee to determine the carrying capacity of tourist towns (Kedarnath is not one of them). This study needs to be done in a time-bound manner.

Uttarakhand, like many other states, depends on tourism, providing options from trekking to religious tourism. To make the best use of its natural wealth, it must embark on long-term planning, including building climate-resilient infra, tourist management that takes into account the state's fragile ecology and employment needs, and provide high-end tourist needs, especially for HNIs. States such as Kerala and Rajasthan have cracked the code somewhat by focusing on quality rather than quantity. Uttarakhand and others must follow suit. States will benefit from this pivot, as will India.

JUST IN JEST

Election-time is the right time to think of India's world domination plans

Why Stop at POK? We Can Get More

Who says that Indian elections are a giant exercise in navel-gazing that doesn't look beyond communities and cabals, and cares about the world the way a bug cares about inequity of wealth? Thanks to excellent chest-thumping rhetoric and the 'never perishable-always microwavable' pizzazz of 'Akh and Bharat', Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir has entered the pile of election 'issues'. While any plans to 'recover' POK may take voters who haven't already voted a while to warm to, being mentally occupied by the notion of merging a disputed territory may well be the perfect opportunity for most Indians to finally locate where POK is on the (disputed) map. Some enthusiastic voters — or, at least, politicians — could even go the extra mile and have other territories, disputed or otherwise, on their hivemind. Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are obvious takeover terrains on the menu. But why stop at India's current borders? There's picturesque and non-controversial Liechtenstein in Europe (that last had an army, of 80 soldiers, in 1868). There's also Wales to consider as an acquisition. Since parts of China are tougher to incorporate into India, why not go beyond POK and get POP — Pakistani-Occupied Pakistan — on our side of the fence? Some would consider also tony parts of SoBo and South Delhi worth bringing into the (Akh and) Bharat fold.

MORE THE MERRIER Empower the opposition to become active political participants

Not Just a One-Horse Town



Amit Kapoor

The adjective 'competitive' in the context of a personality trait, may not always have a positive connotation. However, it almost always is taken to be a positive mark for economies. Why so?

In economic theory, it is a truism that when enterprises seek customers in a competitive economy, they result in higher value for consumers, improved quality of goods and services, a bigger basket of choices, and more innovation. Economic growth and prosperity, therefore, become intimately linked to this fundamental axiom of healthy competition.

India aims to be a \$5 tn economy. So, there's much talk about accelerating growth and enhancing economic competitiveness. But are we through talking about political competition?

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections left the impression of radically reshaping India's political canvas, with BJP disrupting the trend of coalition politics and shifting focus to state-level dynamics. Hidden in the shadows of this feat was the flight of competition from the development debate, and dwindling political dynamism. One of the major reasons behind this is ideological divergences. Often, these are inversely proportional to convergences in development policies.

In India's diverse voter base, aligning politics with divisions like religion, caste or class leads to inefficient redistribution and prioritises narrow interests over broader public goods. Policies designed to serve a select segment of voters lead to customer power being skewed against the av-



A rather lonely race course road

erage citizen by distorting the market. For example, GST was a fiscal reform for enhancing efficiency. Bigger corporations adhered to it. But the administration raised the cost of compliance for smaller and emerging enterprises.

Another continuing failure of development policies has been their inability to include the provision of public goods. Even with the rise of 'basic needs welfarism' and measures to expand the delivery of essential private goods by ramping up state capacity through the JAM trinity, access and delivery of basic public goods remain a challenge. This challenge will continue until we restore dynamic political competition.

In 2017, Katherine M Gehl and Michael Porter, in their Harvard Business School study, 'Why Competition in the Politics Industry is Failing America', used tools of competition and industry to understand bipartisanship in the US, and how it impedes the political system from serving public interest. They studied the business of politics like any other sector, looking at structural components and the threat of new entrants into the market.

If we look at Indian politics in 2024 through this analytical lens, where will it lead us? From 2017 onwards, there has been a growing focus on 'competitive federalism', which has yielded good results.

► **GoI's Aspirational District Programme** in 2018 prompted districts to work towards improving their ranks while achieving a common development goal.

► **Swachh Bharat Mission** The speed and scale at which the programme was implemented is a testament to how competition produces effective outcomes. The strategy is spot on, but conditions and capacity for healthy competition remain limited.

In the long run, India's regional disparities will lock out certain regions and sections from policy outcomes, market access, and means to acquire capital and skills for resilient growth. Closing these gaps in social and spatial inequalities becomes more achievable with governance models, policies and competition that serve public interest over segmented interests.

Looking at India's political history, we have seen multiple scenarios where the coming together of parties has only helped the country's governance apparatus.

► In the late 1980s, Congress' downfall and the era of coalitions were surprisingly marked by steady economic growth. PMs had to recruit other parties into government and assign ministries to them, leading to a more inclusive and collaborative governing approach.

► The 1991 reforms were passed by a coalition government. Political dynamism in a parliamentary democracy is good for public interest and doesn't always spawn instability. The aim should be to facilitate the opposition to become a player, rather than a literal opponent.

So, has this political system broken down in 2024? No. What we see is collusion among major parties to guard the current state of play. This leads to duopolistic competition, where the rivalry appears to be intense for a casual observer, but rivals actually compete to reinforce their differentiated service to limited segments of voters.

In this scenario, there is a default tendency to label new competitors as 'spoilers' who can't win but only split the vote and benefit the other side. It also becomes a grueling task for new entrants to amass social, political and infrastructural capital to build a presence. Surmounting these entry barriers stifles new ideas and innovation at the Centre, and the collateral damage of this collusion is public welfare and development. Reinstating this vibrant political landscape is now imperative for fostering further economic growth and development.

Enhancing transparency and accountability in the electoral process is crucial to safeguard against the erosion of inherent checks and balances. We should strive to eliminate entry barriers for new parties and candidates, fostering a more inclusive political environment. Empowering the opposition to become active political participants rather than mere adversaries would mark a significant breakthrough for effective governance in India.

The writer is chair, Institute for Competitive-ness, Gurgaon, and faculty, Stanford University. Inputs by Meenakshi Ajith



A continuing failure of development policies has been their inability to include the provision of public goods. This will continue until we restore dynamic political competition

ChatGPT **SHAIRI OF THE DAY**

There once was a leader named Putin, Whose travels were often disputin'. He flew to China one day, But got lost on the way, Now he's stuck in a Beijing confutin'!

AI Funding

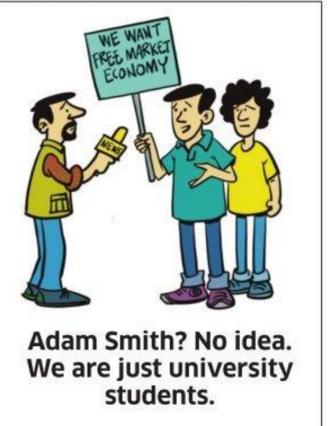
The US once again led the world in terms of total AI private investment. According to Stanford University's 2024 AI Index report, in 2023, the \$67.2 billion invested in the US was roughly 8.7 times greater than the amount invested in the next highest country, China (\$7.8 billion), and 17.8 times the amount invested in the United Kingdom (\$3.8 billion)...

Private investment in artificial intelligence

	Investment (\$, billion)		No. of newly funded cos (2013-23)
	2013-23	2023	
US	335.24	67.22	5,509
China	103.65	7.76	1,446
UK	22.25	3.78	727
Israel	12.83	1.52	442
Canada	10.56	1.61	397
Germany	10.35	1.91	319
India	9.85	1.39	338
France	8.31	1.69	391
S Korea	7.25	1.39	189
Singapore	6.25	1.14	193

Note: Report covers artificial intelligence startups that have received over \$1.5 million in investment since 2013. Source: Visual Capitalist

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Oz One Out for Students



Pradeep S Mehta & Amit Dasgupta

On May 11, Australia announced that it plans to introduce legislation to set an allocation for the maximum number of new international student enrolments education providers can offer. Universities and colleges will have until the beginning of 2025 to prepare themselves for a cut in foreign student numbers.

This decision has caused consternation not only among leading universities in Australia but also among potential international students. The overseas student population in Australia reached an all-time high of 671,000 in March, a 15% increase on the previous year. A section of Australian media has referred to this development as a 'soft cap'. Soft or hard, it's a cap.

The rationale behind the proposed legislation is unclear; though the Anthony Albanese government says it is to maintain integrity and sustainability of the sector. What can be inferred is that the government would like to crack down on dodgy education providers, agents and students. Nobody disputes the need to do this. But limiting the number of aspiring and qualified international students defies logic. Indeed, it is also unfair, as it suggests that one size fits all.

The argument that unprecedented growth in the number of international students has put the housing market in Australia's big cities under strain and raised rental prices is also unfounded, according to Property Council of Australia, which debunked the government's reasoning. It bears mentioning that minister of education, Jason Clare, acknowledged the importance of international students when the proposed legislation was announced. International education reflects

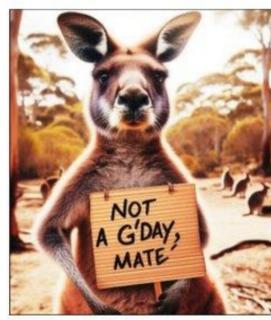
extraordinary soft power because: ► It creates Australia champions among non-Australians. Students become goodwill ambassadors for life. It also enhances the quality of international education through a truly global learning experience.

► International students are a major source of revenue for education providers and the economy. Universities Australia, the representative body for the tertiary sector, said 'certainty, stability and growth' were needed in future policy. It said international education contributed \$48 bn to the economy last year. That's more than half of Australia's economic growth.

While there was a slump during the pandemic years, international student enrolments are back to pre-pandemic levels, with promise of further growth that could establish Australia among the top three preferred choices for higher education.

Reaching this status has taken over a decade of hard work and extraordinary outreach. Why would the government wish to throttle the goose that lays the golden eggs? The motives are confusing and unclear. Implications for the market and signals that it sends are, however, clear.

Perceptions matter greatly. Indian students are undoubtedly worried because: ► Australia has rapidly become a sought-after higher-education destination.



Brand Australia mustn't go down under

Despite high cost of living, some Australian universities offer top-quality education.

► Work-study rights enhance the living experience in a multicultural environment. This year also saw a significant diversion of Indian students to Australia from Canada.

In fact, 2024 would have seen a record outflow of Indian students to Australia. The proposed legislation will undoubtedly impact this negatively, as students are not starved of choice. The Australia-India Economic Strategy would also be adversely impacted, as it places a high premium on collaboration in the international education sector.

One can only speculate on the thinking that prompted this extraordinary announcement. The messaging has gone wrong because it has triggered fear and confusion. That the government has said that it is open to consultations is a welcome development.

There is a simple maxim in management — it takes years to build a brand and only minutes to destroy it. Rebuilding the brand takes much longer. Brand Australia on the international education front is certainly facing a grave self-goal from this proposed legislation.

Purely going by speculation until and unless Canberra clarifies, the proposed legislation appears to be aimed at curbing migration. For the government to introduce such legislation is unthinkable considering that Australia is a land of migrants and multiculturalism is a part of its DNA.

On the international education front, it will kill Brand Australian. For aspiring Indian or other international students, there are other destinations available where they would not be seen as a liability. Furthermore, a few Australian universities are opening campuses in India, which would undoubtedly gain in the process, but not if the proposed legislation goes through without caveats. The Aussie government needs to rethink this decision.

Mehta is secretary-general, CUTS International, and Dasgupta is former consul general of India to Australia

Watching Birds Return Home

As the sun begins its late descent, a tranquil anticipation fills the air. It's that magical time of day when the world holds its breath, awaiting the arrival of its avian inhabitants. Watching birds return home at dusk is a joy of watching creatures in nature.

As the first fluttering wings appear overhead, a sense of wonder washes over you. Silhouetted against the fading light, these travellers paint a mesmerising tableau, their graceful flight weaving intricate patterns in the sky like an Escher print. Each species brings its own unique charm



— from the elegant swoop of swallows to the majestic glide of kites.

But it's not just the visual spectacle that enchants. It's also the eruption of chirps, trills and calls that truly transports one to another realm that becomes heavy with the lightness of air. Everything becomes alive with the melodic chaos of birdsong.

As the last of the stragglers find their nests, a profound sense of peace settles over the landscape. In this fleeting moment, as day gives way to night, you feel a deep connection to everything. Watching birds return home is a reminder of the enduring magic that surrounds us.



THE SPEAKING TREE

Be More Creative

OSHO

Nobody in this world is a sinner and nobody is a saint. These are just pathways for energy. There is much energy stored inside our bodies, and this energy has to be used creatively. When an emotion arises, release it through your body in the form of any exercise.

Second, learn to be creative. You are all without creativity. Creativity means that you do something solely for the joy it gives you. You can sculpt, write a song, sing a song, play the sitar — it does not matter what you do, but do it only for pleasure and not as a profession. Do something in life for the sheer joy, something that is not your business. Then, all the destructive energy will be transformed and will become creative.

Redirect your emotions and give this ordinary life a creative direction. You can just make a garden around your house and love the plants and rejoice in them. Every intelligent man needs to do something creative. Someone who gives no time to creativity will be disturbed....

Direct all your energy towards it, and then there will be no destructive energy left. The more creative you are, the more your anger will disappear. Anger is the sign of an uncreative person. You carry so much energy within yourself — where will it go? It will come out through sex, through sexual desire. It has to come out somehow.

Abridged from *The Path of Meditation*, courtesy: Osho International Foundation, www.osho.com

Chat Room

Second-Class Cityzens, All

Apropos the Edit, 'Fix Our Juggad Cities First, Then Get Viksit' (May 16), India's cities are unlivable and unprepared for the future. Three core issues, viz, financial constraints, severe shortage of skilled urban planners and limited powers of local governments, contribute to the looming crisis. Urbanisation is intrinsic to development and economic growth. Since there are constraints on the capacity of the governments to finance urban infrastructure, the need to channelise private capital is critical. Sustainable practices and technological innovations would be key for creating liveable, climate-resilient and inclusive cities.

PRADEEP KUMAR Surat

Interests Ported To West Asia

This refers to 'Chabahar, Port of a Smart Call' by Harsh V Pant and Prithvi Gupta (May 16). The India-Iran agreement for long-term operations at the strategic Chabahar port is a significant development, given the disruptions affecting global trade due to the instability in West Asia. The strategic shift will amplify India's cargo traffic to Central Asia tenfold. With China eyeing Indian Ocean dominance via ports like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Chabahar's development is expected to strengthen India's position and prompt robust responses to potential threats. India has taken bold steps in pursuit of its interest and that of the region.

GREGORY FERNANDES Mumbai

Hauled Over The Coalition

Apropos 'It's the Politics, Stupid' by T K Arun (May 15), we've seen the throng-focused coalitions of P V Narasimha Rao (1991-96) and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1996), and the disastrous coalitions led by Chandra Shekhar (1990-91) and H D Deve Gowda (1996-97), along with the corruption-associated UPA (2004-14). We have also witnessed the majority rule of Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964-66), Indira Gandhi-led Congress (1966-77) and Narendra Modi (2014-24). People don't vote to see a single-party majority or a coalition in power; but for the person who will lead the nation. So, what matters is a competent leader at the helm.

ABHYUDITA GUPTA Ujjain

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



CONTRAPUNTO

Fear has always been a very important whistleblower

—Erik Peevernagie

Metropolitics

In Mumbai and Delhi, poll battles are about reaffirming party identity

The vote in financial capital Mumbai's six Lok Sabha constituencies is on May 20. Capital Delhi's seven LS seats vote on May 25. Mumbai barely stayed off the headlines — selecting candidates was messy for the four regional parties, and for BJP and Congress. Some negotiations were downright peculiar with bigwigs unwilling to contest. In Delhi, though, one can barely tell so far that elections are on, despite three national parties in the fray — BJP, Congress, and AAP.

The Delhi fights of course were being fought elsewhere, with Kejriwal arrested on March 21. On interim bail till June 1, the AAP chief has hit the campaign trail. He and Shah are shooting barb-tipped rhetorical arrows at each other. It's almost like campaign scenes are playing out without the voter's involvement, who's watching it like some reality show. Those with votes are supposed to play the role of 'audience' — and, suitably entertained, expected to go out and vote.

A closer look at Delhi shows a silent churn within parties. In BJP, which won all 7 in 2014 and 2019, a single MP is re-contesting — Manoj Tiwari. Singer Hans Raj Hans is more visible in Punjab's campaign; ex-Union health minister Harsh Vardhan, who posed with Ramdev's Coronil,

exited politics; Gautam Gambhir opted out; BJP dropped Meenakshi Lekhi and, rightly, two MPs with little understanding of parliamentary language. Congress's Sheila Dikshit is no more; Ajay Maken took the RS route; its state chief Lovely joined BJP. Congress veteran JP Agarwal, BJP-import Udit Raj and CPI-import Kanhaiya Kumar are its hopes. AAP's banking on Somnath Bharti to defeat BJP's Bansuri Swaraj, who's banking on her mother's goodwill to win New Delhi. On every seat, it's a lowkey but high stakes battle, without the din.

Mumbai's the potboiler, with Sena vs Sena on three seats, BJP vs Congress on two — BJP's Piyush Goyal (Mumbai North), and Ujjwal Nikam (Mumbai North Central) are among contestants. But as in rest of Maharashtra, contests centre on parties' existential dilemmas, the many switches too confusing for voters to go only by the candidate. In both metros, the fights are different but every contest seeks to re-establish party identity.

It's Courage, Not Crime
Whistleblowers strengthen democracy but face dangers. Give them strong legal protection

Whistleblowers have it tough across the world. The Supreme Court in Canberra, Australia, recently sentenced former Australian army lawyer David McBride for revealing information about alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. This comes seven years after Australian public broadcaster ABC published a series of articles based on information provided by McBride. That information was separately confirmed by an Australian govt inquiry. However, it was McBride the whistleblower who was prosecuted.

From false claims to national security | Whistleblowing has a chequered history. During the American Civil War Abraham Lincoln's govt enacted the False Claims Act (FCA) to incentivise reporting corruption in military supplies. Interestingly, FCA remains on US statute books in an amended form and has been used over the years in cases related to fraud in military contracts and corruption in the pharma industry. But things get murky when it comes to matters of national security and wrongdoings in militaries. State interests and discipline are privileged over those seeking to spotlight internal wrongs.

Risky business | Perhaps the most high-voltage case of whistleblowing related to war crimes this century was the highlighting of atrocities committed by US soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. The horrific torture was exposed by Sergeant Joseph Darby. Once identified as the whistleblower, he and his family faced harassment and even death threats. Similarly, US's NSA contractor Edward Snowden had to flee to Russia for exposing illegal mass surveillance programmes.

India's paper tiger | India passed a Whistle Blowers Protection Act in 2014. Ironically, it hasn't been notified to date. In any case, the Act has multiple exemptions — it doesn't cover armed forces and is not applicable to the private sector. Nor does it provide financial incentives for whistleblowing like the American FCA. Civil society groups have argued that attacks against RTI activists and whistleblowers have increased in the absence of a legal framework. True, state secrets need to be protected for national security. But this can't be a blanket cover to hide corruption and criminal wrongs. Democracy is strengthened by courageous whistleblowers speaking up for justice.

Climate of fashion

A season of extreme weather events in quick succession requires an addition to many a wardrobe

Jug Suraiya



The CEO of the Indian offshoot of the international garment maker, Uniqlo, noted for its all-weather fashion wear, held a special staff meeting of all the company's employees.

Thanks to a localised version of man-made climate change marked by totally unpredictable extreme weather events occurring in rapid succession, our company has been presented with a great opportunity to break all our previous sales records, said the CEO. Everyone present knew what he was talking about. This variant of climate change had all the media, both mainstream and social, abuzz with excited speculation as to what would happen next, or when, or why.

Even the experts on the subject admitted that the only thing that could with any degree of probability be predicted about this aspect of climate change was that it was totally unpredictable.

Some attributed the volatility of the weather to that usual suspect in such matters, 'western disturbances'.

However, in this season the weather seemed to veer, not only from day to day, but from hour to hour, not just because of western disturbances, but also disturbances emanating from the east, as well as the north, and the south, leading to the surmise that had there been more than these points in the compass, those too would have pitched in to do their disturbing duty.

Others attributed the mercurial changeability of the climate to the sharp rise in emissions that created heat island effects of hot air and other gaseous emanations.

Whatever the reasons behind the uncertainty of what the climate could get up to, from moment to moment, said the CEO, the situation calls for a very special type of garment that makes the wearer adapt to any and all weather conditions, no matter how swiftly and randomly they may change.

What made this item of clothing so topically popular was the unique material it was made of which, chameleon-like, could change colour so as to be most advantageous to the wearer in any given environment.

It was this remarkable capability that inspired the name given to this addition to the wardrobe: Turncoat.

Courting The Cops, Always

SC order in the NewsClick case shows trial court judges are authorising detentions casually. With around 50 lakh arrests a year and thousands of remand applications a day, they must apply judicial scrutiny

Naveed Mehmood Ahmad



On Wednesday, Supreme Court declared the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, founder of NewsClick, illegal and ordered his release from custody. Purkayastha had been in police and judicial custody since October last year, in connection with a case under provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

Issue | Individual rights and national security

SC declared Purkayastha's arrest and subsequent police remand illegal on the basis that grounds of his arrest were not communicated to him in writing. The court further held that mere filing of the chargesheet would not rectify the illegality and unconstitutionality of the arrest and grant of police custody.

The court's order is significant as it recognises the need for procedural propriety to protect individual liberties, even in cases involving national security concerns.

It is, however, even more crucial for bringing attention to how remand applications are processed by magistrates and law enforcement agencies, effectively obstructing the realisation of the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 21 and 22.

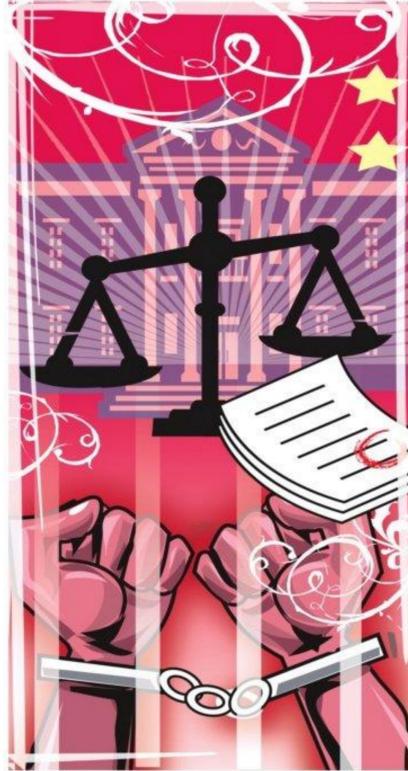
Article 22 | Provide grounds of arrest in writing

Article 22 of the Constitution enshrines the right to be informed of the grounds of arrest, and to consult and be defended by a legal practitioner of choice. Clause (5) of Article 22 extends this protection to cases of preventive detention.

Drawing from the protection that Article 22 offers, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, UAPA, 1967 and other special laws require the arresting officers to inform the arrestee of the grounds of arrest. This is critical to ensure that the arrestee is able to mount a defence, protect their personal liberty and avoid unnecessary pre-trial detention.

Interestingly, these provisions do not mandate the communication of grounds of arrest to be in written form. This, in fact, was one of the grounds on which the state opposed Purkayastha's release. A contention that SC held was "untenable in the eyes of law".

Relying on SC's judgments in *Harikisan vs State of Maharashtra* (1962) and *Lallubhai vs UOI* (1982), the



bench underlined that communication of the grounds of arrest in writing "is sacrosanct and cannot be breached under any situation". In essence, a detailed and written communication of the grounds of arrest is critical for a fair remand hearing and to realise the purpose of Article 22.

Issue | Remand and due process

SC's scrutiny of the events surrounding Purkayastha's arrest and his remand hearing, however, reveals a far more concerning fact about the workings of the criminal justice system. The court noted that the entire process of securing police remand for Purkayastha was carried out in a clandestine manner, suggesting an attempt to circumvent due process of law.

In fact, the failure on the part of the police to inform Purkayastha and his advocate of choice the grounds of arrest and the proposed remand application, as well as the timing of the remand proceedings — as early as 6 in the morning at the residence of the remand judge — suggest how investigative agencies may sidestep due process requirements to retain custody of the accused.

Trial courts | First line of defence

The remand judge, perhaps the only line of defence in such a situation, failed to acknowledge these concerns and to apply judicial scrutiny, instead mechanically granting police custody for seven days.

Interestingly, this is not the only case in which remand proceedings have been called into question. In fact, SC itself in *Aradesh Kumar vs State of Bihar* (2014) categorically stated that in many cases detention is authorised in a "routine, casual and cavalier manner", grossly affecting the liberty of citizens.

To check this practice, SC in *Manubhai Ratilal Patel vs State of Gujarat And Others* (2013) underscored that the act of directing remand of an accused is a judicial function and that it is "obligatory on the part of the Magistrate to apply his mind and not to pass an order of remand automatically or in a mechanical manner".

Issue | Accountability for arrest procedures

With around 50 lakh arrests recorded every year, and thousands of remand applications heard by judges every day, the critical nature of this function cannot be overlooked, especially given the overcrowding in prisons nationwide and the minimal protections provided when an accused is in police custody.

The Wednesday order of SC must prompt greater scrutiny of arrest procedures and remand proceedings. It should also foster a renewed emphasis on procedural fairness and accountability within the criminal justice system.

The writer is a Senior Resident Fellow at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Didigiri In A Bengal Divided By Class

Trinamool has fostered a strong regionalism that equates Bengaliness with bhadralok high culture. But other Bengalis, like marginalised Matuas, are drawn towards BJP's Hindu canopy

Uday Chandra and Rounak Bose



Once again, Mamata Banerjee is in a fierce fight to defend her turf from BJP. And once again, Didi is fighting alone as her INDIA coalition partners contest separately.

In 2011, Trinamool Congress formed the govt after 34 years of Left Front govt in Bengal. Its popular slogan *Maa Maati Maanush* (mother, land, people) overrode the Left's abstractions. But much like its communist predecessors, Trinamool has fostered a strong regionalism that equates Bengaliness with *bhadralok* high culture.

It is unsurprising, then, that those who are Bengali but not *bhadralok* (genteel folk) have been BJP's principal targets since 2019. Treated contemptuously as *nimnoborgo* (lower strata) or, worse, *chhotolok* (small fry), the bottom half of society in Bengal has shown its openness to a new politics of dignity that promises to overcome the lottery of birth.

Matuas are a reformist sect of formerly untouchable and marginalised castes that have negotiated for loaves and fishes with the Modi sarkar. Seeking respectability within an all-India Hinduism, they have embraced festivals such as Ram Navami and Janmashtami, characterised by Trinamool as impositions on Bengalis by North Indian outsiders.

Stigmatised by caste as much as by forced migration from present-day Bangladesh, Matuas are now divided. The first family of the sect, descended from founder Harichand Thakur, split into pro-BJP and pro-Trinamool factions. The pro-BJP faction led by Shantanu Thakur, a minister in Modi govt and MP from Bongaon, has assured Matuas with refugee histories that their salvation lies in CAA.

But the pro-Trinamool faction, led by his aunt Mamata Bala Thakur, a Trinamool Rajya Sabha nominee,

insists that CAA requires disenfranchising oneself in order to apply for new citizenship claims. As Mamata put it, Matuas are already Indian citizens, and new citizenship claims may come with fresh uncertainty.

Matuas are salient in at least 10 Lok Sabha constituencies, mainly Ranaghat and Bongaon and to a lesser extent, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Outreach to them seeks to redefine what it means to be Hindu in Bengal, where 'Hindu' had long meant *bhadralok*. Successive attempts by political parties to consolidate heterodox sects and subordinated castes came to naught.

The Left Front, claiming caste-blindness, attempted to stitch together a 'socialist' polity in which all could claim a stake. But it did not politicise Hindu-Muslim difference, as had happened in undivided Bengal, a Muslim-majority province in British India.

Today, in a state where Muslims are close to 30% of the population, BJP has pitted SC and ST groups in the state as demographic counterweights. Adivasis in the Jungle Mahals and the sub-Himalayan foothills or Rajbongshis, Namashudras, and Bagdis, together roughly half of all SCs in the state, can proclaim their Hinduness to vote for BJP now without giving up meat, alcohol and other 'polluting' substances. Hindu identity is now, seemingly, a wholly electoral affair.

In 2019, BJP won 18 out of 42 seats and 40.6% of votes in Bengal, winning handsomely in the ST-dominated seats in North Bengal and the Jungle Mahals. It was a closer runner-up to Trinamool's 22 seats and 43.7% of votes.

But in the 2021 assembly

elections, a drop in votes by 2.6% led to a massive loss for BJP, which won only 77 out of 292 seats. We may sense a triumphant regionalism at work here, but in a short span of time, BJP has cobbled the support of roughly two in five voters in the state. Despite embarrassing reports of fake rape cases in Sandeshkhali and sexual harassment charges against the state governor CV Ananda Bose, it remains a formidable rival to Trinamool.

Yet, unless it makes deeper inroads into the middle and top of Bengali society, it is unlikely to become the first governing party in Delhi since 1971 to win a majority of Bengal's 42 parliamentary seats.

On the fringes, Congress and Left will fight together against both Trinamool and BJP. The INDIA coalition is missing in action. A tripartite contest is likely to favour BJP in Muslim-dominated seats by reducing Trinamool's vote share among Muslims. Vote-cutters in 2024, these parties aim to regain lost ground in the state for the next assembly elections. It may be best to see these ferociously-contested elections as one of the final episodes of the bahubalis of Trinamool taking on everyone else.

For now, Mamata's *bhadralok* identity, shared with every chief minister of the state since Independence, holds sway. After this election, though, the question on everyone's lips is: how much longer will didigiri last?

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Bengal votes on May 20 (7 seats) in the fifth of its 7-phase polls

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards our fellow men

BR Ambedkar

Time To Enlighten, Educate And Express

Radhanath Swami

Leaders are the most important people in society. They define the goals, priorities and progress of a nation. They represent the nation on the world stage through conduct, character, and personality. They influence the aspirations, attitudes and mindsets of the people. They look towards their leaders for inspiration and motivation. History shows that great and good leaders make a nation, whereas bad and wicked leaders break a nation. The most significant mishaps and catastrophes the world has gone through and is going through are a result of the mistakes of its leaders. The better leaders we have, the world will be a better place to live and thrive for all. Bhagwad Gita (3.21) stresses the role of leaders as role models for the public and the need to educate those leaders (4.2).

It is essential to have leaders with

character and competence for the holistic growth of individuals and nations. Holistic growth involves dharma, social, artha, economic, kama, personal, and moksha, spiritual growth. Being in a democracy is a great privilege wherein we have the right to choose our leaders in a free and fair way. According to a Pew survey, around half of the nations in the world are bereft of this privilege. Vibhishan wanted to live a life of righteousness, devotion and compassion. But he was caught up under the tyrannical rule of Ravan, the leader of Lanka. Ravan propagated materialism, self-centredness and irreligion. Vibhishan realised that Ravan's leadership was detrimental to his growth and the growth of Lanka. He tried his best to counsel Ravan and inspire him to mend his ways but to no

avail. Then, he came across Hanuman and heard about Ram, his exemplary leadership, glorious virtues and kindness.

Vibhishan found out more about Ram's leadership. He contrasted Ravan's leadership with Ram's leadership.

He felt Ram's leadership would be congenial for his growth and that of Lanka. Then, he was in a situation where he had to choose between Ravan and Ram. He boldly made the right choice to be with Ram as Ram provided him with an opportunity to assist in fighting against Ravan. Eventually, Ravan was defeated, and Vibhishan was installed as the king of Lanka. By choosing the right leader, Vibhishan did good for the people of Lanka.

First, we need to realise how the quality of our lives and progress depends on the type of government that

gets elected. It affects not just our lives but also lives of our fellow citizens and future citizens of the nation. The symptom of an evolved human being is that he thinks about others' welfare. Once we enlighten ourselves with the importance and significance of casting our vote, we can evaluate our choices.

Once we grasp the gravity of our duty, we must meticulously consider the choices before us. We must stay focused on our purpose, resisting the allure of superficial temptations. It is crucial to consult reliable sources and thoroughly assess candidates' character, values, and competence. Their past actions and future goals should be scrutinised. This careful evaluation will guide us in making informed decisions that align with our values and aspirations.

Once we educate ourselves about the different choices, then we should select the best option with confidence and clarity.



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