

DECCAN
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A long, acrimonious poll campaign will end today

One of the longest and most acrimonious election campaigns in recent history is coming to a close with the loudspeakers falling silent on Thursday ahead of the seventh and final phase of voting for the 18th Lok Sabha scheduled on June 1. It would indeed be remarkable if the election produces a result that will allow Prime Minister Narendra Modi a third term, which no Prime Minister other than Jawaharlal Nehru has managed so far. It would also be a repeat of history if the ruling front is sent packing by the people for wrongly reading their mood.

One of the key elements of the campaign none could miss is the shift to the hyper-local from the national which was earlier the norm. While the nation's security and territorial integrity were key elements of the campaign in 2019, corruption and call for a change dominated the hustings in 2014. But this time, although the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and its leader Prime Minister Narendra Modi started off the campaign with "Modi's guarantees" and the promise of taking India to the status of the world's third largest economy should they secure a third term, they dropped that agenda midway and switched to the beaten path of Hindutva.

As for the opposition INDIA bloc, it never had a national narrative or a common minimum programme to begin with, most of its partners including the Congress coming up with their own individual manifestos. That, however, jelled with its character as it is a loose structure with partners having their local issues on top of their respective agendas, because what unified them appears to have been the fear that the misuse of the Central agencies and the penal laws would be taken to the next level should the NDA and Mr Modi get a fresh term. So even the issues they took up, which included rural distress, unemployment and Central government policies and programmes which aggravate wealth inequality in society, were localised and sold in retail. Whether that sales push was effective or not would only become clear come June 4.

Some of the usual acrimonies germane to electioneering apart, the 2024 campaign will nevertheless go down in history for the brazen attempts made by the ruling front, led by no less than the Prime Minister, to sell its divisive agenda in violation of the law and the Model Code of Conduct, and the deafening silence of the Election Commission. Instead of reading them the riot act, the poll body chose to maintain status quo. It is not unknown to the EC that this nation is founded on its diversities and attempts to strike at the fault lines in its foundation would weaken and eventually undo its whole structure. Curiously enough, the EC still fought shy of disciplining the real trouble-makers. Instead, it pounced on minor waywardness without fail. The only hope that, therefore, remains at the end of the campaign is that the country which has survived the Partition and Emergency would find its own way to remain peaceful and sensible despite the worst of provocations.

Prepare for extreme weather

At least four to five of the northeastern states suffered heavily from the rain that the season's first tropical storm Remal triggered over the region. As the cyclone, a heat engine of wind and rain, was brewing in the Bay of Bengal for days, there was time which West Bengal utilised well to prepare by moving lakhs of the most vulnerable people from the path of the storm.

In coordination with the Central disaster agency, West Bengal took measures that helped keep the loss of lives to storm-related incidents to the minimum (seven), but the northeastern states may have been caught napping as at least 37 people died there and dozens more are missing.

Given many parts of the northeast region are hilly or of undulating terrain that are distinctly prone to mud and landslides, moving people to shelters for anticipated heavy rain may not be as easy as in the plains. But to have a quarry operating in Aizwal district in Mizoram in such weather and losing around 17 people, including two minors, amounted to criminal negligence. And children died in mishaps while getting to schools in such adverse conditions.

As tropical storms rage through India in and out of the monsoon season, there are things to be learnt from each experience. The example of Odisha is often quoted in having put together model plans for evacuation and safety of people ahead of each storm, minimising loss of life and damage to dwellings and infrastructure.

It appears Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Nagaland have some way to go to prepare for extreme weather events of which there will only be more coming, and of greater intensity too as global warming-induced climate change make them more powerful, with one study predicting cyclones with twice the destructive power of present-day storms.

It is known that millions in India dwell in less than the safest possible homes in the more vulnerable regions that suffer most when extreme rainfall events occur and most of them would need lessons in awareness as well as help from the local administration to batten down safely to get past extreme weather events.

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Subhani



India's energy challenge as global climate threat grows



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

Top Union government officials have been unusually busy, even as their political bosses are engaged in the quinquennial political survival game, over the last two months. Tasked by their political superiors to chart what the new government should do once in office, they have cooked up a storm of new initiatives and regulations to undergird the action plans of the new government. One such is a directive from the Central Electricity Authority that no coal plants should be retired till 2030. This is reassuring for the domestic coal industry and miners. But it does not align with decarbonisation or capital preservation objectives. It also illustrates the need for an agreed plan for undergirding a staged energy transition — by 2030, 2047 and Net Zero by 2070.

The cheapest way to reduce GHG emissions is to constrain the amount of energy used. India cannot do that yet because its development needs would get compromised. The second option is to decarbonise as quickly as possible. This option is limited by capital availability constraints and the paucity of ready-to-go, reasonably priced technology beyond solar and wind power. Both vary with the time of day and season. Integrating higher levels of either into grid supply can happen only once reasonably priced electricity storage devices (gigawatt scale batteries or alternatives) which charge when supply is surplus and discharge when supply is low, become available. Green hydrogen, the great new hope, for decarbonising industry, heavy freight and shipping is even further away.

Given the uncertainties associated with new clean technologies, doubling down on energy efficiency — reducing the amount of energy used for a unit of

work — is a win-win option. Another important metric is least-cost energy transition since India is not capital abundant. At present, the policies do not dovetail around a commonly agreed "energy and capital-use efficient" action plan. To be sure, there are fora for inter-ministerial consultation. But different ministries work within their own mandates. These are, unsurprisingly, tailored to what suits the mammoth energy public sector enterprises under them.

What, for instance, is the plan for cooking energy? Cooked food is central to Indian tastes and habits. ICMR advisories also propagate the health advantages of own-cooked food over processed or packaged food. Electricity is the most efficient option for cooking. At present, its use is limited to refrigerate cooked food, heat up cooked food quickly in microwaves and boil water for tea or coffee. But cooking is mostly done on Liquified Petroleum Gas (LPG) or Pressurised Natural Gas (PNG) fired stoves. In villages biomass is a cheaper but noxious fuel and clean biofuel or compressed bio gas only at the pilot stage. Unlike the reliable supply of LPG or piped PNG (only partially available in a few big cities), electricity supply is not reliable enough for households to make the switch.

The near-term prospects of reliable electricity are low given the choke point of parlous distribution utilities, many owned by state governments, and all regulated by them. Distribution revenues do not match expenses because line loss of electricity is high due to ageing network assets, poor commercial management of billing and collections and the politically driven regulatory caps on retail electricity tariffs. Union and state governments have yet to create a common incentive for efficiency enhancement

What is the plan for cooking energy? Cooked food is central to Indian tastes and habits. Electricity is the most efficient option for cooking. But cooking is mostly done on LPG and PNG.

in distribution, though a fourth Union government financial support package is operational.

Within the Union government, siloed policy formulation by the ministry of power (for electricity) and the ministry of petroleum and natural gas (for LPG and PNG), drive rapid but independent expansion of their supply networks per customer demand — a market-based approach — but with the downside of stranded electricity assets (transmission lines to nowhere) or gas assets (underused gas pipelines) being created.

Another example is the planning regulations for city development and the design of buildings, which falls under the ministry of housing and urban affairs in the Union government and counterpart ministries in state governments. The latter regulate municipalities and towns which implement urban planning regulations. Energy demand emanates from transport, cooking, and lighting. Energy efficiency in lighting is a success story, driven by the decline in prices from a global scaling-up of energy efficient LED bulbs and the government policy support to market these nationally.

LEDs are several times more efficient than the "lamps", or incandescent bulbs, used earlier. They consume a fifth of the electricity for a given unit of illumination and are cheaper to use.

Sadly, the energy savings from LED bulbs is being wasted as building regulations encourage horizontal rather than vertical spread of buildings. In New Delhi, for plotted houses side setbacks have been eliminated and front and back setbacks minimised to suit developers because the built-up area gets increased. But encouraging growth of low rise,

row houses, built end to end and back to front in which lights must be turned on to see anything even during day, comes at the expense of energy efficiency, which would suggest optimisation of natural light via appropriately sized setbacks.

If the built-up area, inconsistent with the circularity principles of Mission LIFE, continues to embed carbon, it seriously cripples energy transition efforts over the next five decades. Policy support and tax disincentives should drive homeowners in low-density, low-rise neighbourhoods looking for more space, to pool land and build high-rises with common utility services — access roads, parks, drains, water and electricity supply, sewage disposal and "walk to" commercial centres, with sufficient diversity and depth, to service daily needs, locally.

Transit-oriented city development with dense vertically arrayed habitations, at nodal points along mass transit systems, like Metros, supported by last-mile buses, is the only future-consistent way to lower the energy expended in transport. Until cities are designed to discourage private transport by making public transport attractive, safe, and cost-effective, urban energy efficiency gains will not materialise. Once again, as in electricity retail supply, short-term ministerial and inter-governmental objectives dominate policymaking. State governments treat municipalities like subaltern pools of influence who must be kept constrained and dependent on state government largesse, rather than a third level of government which is to implement the change.

In the time and target bound global transition to a decarbonised economy, high levels of embedded carbon from assets being created now, present a serious risk, not only for India — a front-runner to grow into becoming the third largest economy by 2047 — but also for the success of global efforts to limit, if not reverse, catastrophic climate change.

The writer is adviser, Observer Research Foundation

LETTERS

MEANINGLESS QUESTION

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge has correlated the Make-in-India programme of the government and the rising trade deficit in the country and asked Prime Minister Modi why he is silent on Make-in-India. One feels Kharge's observation is meaningless. Make-in-India is about the foreign direct investment, which comes under the capital account of the balance of payments (BoP). India has a deficit in the balance of trade (BoT), which comes under the current account of the BoP. India could easily wipe off the deficit in BoT with the capital account surplus. Considering the increase in portfolio investment in the country in recent times which is also a capital component of the BoP, trade deficit is not an issue at all. It is as simple as that.

S.Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

IN PRAISE OF MAMATA

Mamata the TMC leader took INDIA block by surprise by announcing that she was incapable of participating INDIA bloc meeting on June 1. She has a tight schedule having to take up post-Remal cyclone remedial measures on a war footing. Also voting for 9 constituencies being underway she is supposed to monitor the campaigning and the aftermath procedures which is why she may be skipping the opposition conclave. The state's wellbeing is of her paramount importance because she must claim crores of rupees to meet the damage caused by the cyclone. Though she falls between two stools, her commitment to the welfare of her state rather than taking part in the INDIA bloc is commendable.

Sivanthiraja
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Saeed Naqvi
Wide Angle



Communalism not enough: It must be tied to nationalism for political results

Not far from Prayagraj (Allahabad) are two contiguous villages of Dadupur and Sarangapur in Chhoka block, across the Yamuna. They are in Allahabad constituency (Prayagraj name isn't being used in the polls). Phulpur next door was in the news as two stars were whisked away as unbelievably large crowds threatened a stampede. Rahul Gandhi and Akhilesh Yadav had to be protected. Such massive crowds are indicators which way the electoral balance is tilting.

Dadupur is dominated by Shias and a sprinkling of Dalits. All Muslims, irrespective of sectarian divisions, are presumed to oppose Narendra Modi. An aggressive Shia cleric of Lucknow, Saiyyid Kalbe Jawwad, has created confusion. He went and tied an "Imamzamin" (amulet) on the arm Lucknow BJP candidate, defence minister Rajnath Singh. Was it a signal to Shia voters?

Voting there was on May 25. On May 22, three busloads of Shias left for Jogipura Dargah in Najibabad for the annual Urs, abandoning Congress candidate Ujjwal Raman Singh.

At Sarangapur, dominated by Brahmins, events took a different turn. Erstwhile pradhan Lakshmi Shankar Mishra got a call from the police station. When Mishra turned up, he was given an option: either cool your heels at the police station or go home and not be seen in public. Then at Karch-chana police station, a worker Congress candidate Ujjwal Singh's respected father, Rewati Raman

Singh, was detained. When the veteran leader drove there to seek his loyalist's release, not only did the police not release his friend, the officer issued a terse warning: you can't step out of the thana. Word soon spread, and a crowd began to gather. Rewati Raman Singh was allowed to go home.

Going by the word of reliable journalists in Lucknow and others who travelled across UP, strong-arm police behaviour has been something of an epidemic. As I write this, I receive a call from Ambedkarnagar that the police scaled the walls of the Opposition candidate's house to restrain his supporters from stirring out to exert influence.

Employing the police in any circumstance has become almost normal in UP. However, excessive police action could also be a sign of nervousness as some reports from the field are not flattering.

In Hindutva circles, there is pronounced disappointment that building the Ram Mandir has not been much of an electoral draw. Building a temple does not stir emotions on the same scale as pulling down a mosque does. Standing with folded hands in front of Lord Ram's image is a spiritual experience; breaking a mosque to build a temple is an angry emotional experience, translatable into political action.

If you want to go back over three decades and watch the photograph of Uma Bharti clambering onto Murli Manohar Joshi's back watching the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, the expression on their faces is

ecstatic, even orgasmic. They were really celebrating a violent victory over the Mughals. It was this kind of experience that the nation felt because of the Balakot airstrikes in 2019. It helped Narendra Modi to win the election.

Why has something like Balakot not happened this time? What is on trial, therefore, is pure, undiluted communalism, a sort of Muslim-hating not seen before as a means to mobilising crowds. The "mangalsutra" that Hindu women wear ritually will be snatched by the Muslims. They will also be handed all the reservations meant for the lower castes. All these anti-Hindu monstrosities (or so goes the allegation) will be the handiwork of the INDIA alliance, a band of Muslim lovers who will go to any lengths to please them. They will even do the "mujra" made famous by nautch girls to rouse the Muslims. All these wonderful nuggets are a part of Mr Modi's speeches.

From this 24-carat communalism, observers have drawn different conclusions. One school of thought suggests that plunging headlong into mindless communalism is a sign of nervousness. In other words, the venom in his utterances is a rear-guard action on his part because he is doing badly in the field. The second school believe that the outcome will not be determined by the ballot box, but by tricks and stratagems.

Careful attention must be given to what Jawed Laiq and Bharati Bhargava have to say after their ritual visit to the Sangam ghats. Covering the 1977

elections, Jawed turned up in Sangam: he found the boatmen and pilgrims from every part of the country a huge resource. That is how he got a world scoop: Indira Gandhi would lose the election. He has made the Sangam his regular hunting ground for election results. He has come up trumps most of the time. This time he has returned with intelligence not available to others, after speaking to diverse Sangam pilgrims as devotees from the Northeast, tribals from Rajasthan and umpteen other places. Jawed and Bharati were surprised to discover what looked like a wave for Narendra Modi.

Jawed said that the excessive and stark communalism of Mr Modi's election utterances were not a function of despair and nervousness. They were part of a well-crafted strategy: the more vicious his speech, the greater his popularity. Muslim-baiting pleases this lot, but I must insert a caveat: venom alone may not translate into electoral success. For this to happen, I have maintained a consistent theory — that communalism has to be tied to nationalism to give political results.

By themselves, the "mangalsutra" or even the cow will not be enough. There has to be the menacing shadow of Pakistan lurking in the background to generate a post-Balakot-like election-changing mood. Let me abide by my theory until June 4, when the results come in.

The writer is a senior journalist and commentator based in New Delhi

OUR VIEW



RBI as a G-Sec retailer: Demystify this avenue

RBI's new Retail Direct app for retail investors to buy government bonds will enlarge the Centre's access to funds. But it should simplify our access to this risk-free investment option

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has launched a mobile app for its Retail Direct facility that lets retail investors buy sovereign bonds directly from the government and trade these online. The app, available for Android devices and iPhones, enables participation in India's primary and secondary bond markets at the touch of a thumb. This is a welcome expansion of its 2021 initiative to throw this asset class open to people at large. On paper, it's a win-win. The Centre could do with a larger pool of creditors beyond the usual banks, mutual funds and other institutional buyers. With retail investors venturing beyond traditional saving avenues like bank deposits, it makes sense to offer government securities (G-Secs) as an alternative. The RBI platform grants access to central paper, treasury bills, state government bonds and sovereign gold bonds. This should attract investors who want a chunk of their long-horizon investment portfolio to be risk-free (as G-Secs are). If G-Sec returns happen to be competitive against the interest earned on fixed deposits and the like, they have all the more reason to use RBI's new app. Savvy investors could even seek capital gains by riding interest-rate cycles.

Unfortunately, this avenue hasn't caught the fancy of investors yet. The online facility was launched back in 2021. As of 27 May 2024, the platform had only 138,819 registrations, with just 124,951 accounts opened. This is puny in comparison with the millions of new demat accounts and mutual fund folios that opened over the same period. Bonds differ from shares in appeal. As safe fixed-income instruments, they can balance the risk borne by share-heavy portfolios. G-Secs, being safer than other debt

options, are ideal components of a retirement plan. So, what holds investors back? Unfamiliarity, for one. Unlike a corporate stock, multiple series of G-Secs are listed on the platform at various prices. The coupon rates of interest they pay annually can differ for the same maturity year. What's relevant is what one expects to earn. The complexity of this is another drawback. Apart from the principal sum, what an investor gets back depends on what the coupon payments amount to—for the bond's remaining tenor—after adjusting for the price paid. This figure, expressed as a percentage, is the bond's 'yield.' As the security's price varies over the length of its tenor by market demand and supply, its yield changes. If its price rises, its yield drops. And vice-versa. The RBI app duly highlights yields across assorted tenors. A G-Sec with a coupon of just over 5.6% that matures in 2026, for example, offers a yield of a bit above 7%, the going rate in this bracket. For a yield above 7.1%, one would need to buy 30-year paper. In general, yields have dipped lately on news of the government possibly needing to borrow less than planned in 2024-25, thanks to the transfer of a ₹2.1 trillion surplus from RBI.

Since all this is harder to grasp than investing in shares, RBI should make a greater effort to demystify the bond market as a new avenue for lay investors. It should redesign its app to serve this purpose. While a standard interface for all market participants is important, what RBI has launched is anything but user-friendly. Although the platform is rich in data, it's also laden with jargon. It would help if its tabulated displays offer us hyperlinks that explain each variable in simple language. To evoke wider interest, this is necessary. Tax incentives for such debt holdings would help too.

GUEST VIEW

Minimum wage: It's likely to hurt the very workers it aims to help

It takes away the only advantage less skilled workers have: Their willingness to work for low pay



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Mahatma Gandhi's quotes have gone out of style these days, but one of his most famous lines is a surprisingly useful tool to help understand why a mandated minimum wage is a bad idea: "Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen and ask yourself if this step you contemplate is going to be any use to him."

Let's adapt this slightly. Think of the poorest person you or your family employs, earning the least wage. For most people reading this in India, that person will likely be a domestic help, car cleaner or security guard. Let's imagine, just for the purpose of this thought experiment, that you must pay each ₹1 lakh a month. Yes, this is a silly number, but bear with the exercise. It will be useful, pinky promise.

Okay, so would you personally still employ your help at ₹1 lakh a month? Most of us would not, and we understand that almost all maids and security guards (including our own) would be out of a job. Why only "most"? Because workers in the very richest of households—big business families, CEO homes or others in that approximate category—will probably not lose their jobs. Not only are their employers rich, these workers probably also possess skills or advantages—say, being able to cook multiple cuisines or speak fluent English—that make their work more valuable. The advantage may just be as

simple as having earned trust. Film star Salman Khan's bodyguard, as we have heard, already earns above the ₹1 lakh a month threshold and won't worry about losing his job.

Now let's lower the minimum monthly wage to a more 'reasonable' number. Let's say ₹20,000. Many more domestic helps and security guards would keep their jobs. But, as with the ₹1 lakh floor, they will all have some advantage over those who lose their jobs, even if it is as simple as living close to an upper-class neighbourhood. The ones who lose their jobs will all be less skilled and less advantaged.

If you're with me so far, you would have gained an intuitive feel for what any minimum wage can do—it will most hurt the people that it is intended to protect. Those without skills, i.e., and those without advantages. The sole advantage they have is their willingness to work for a low wage and a mandated minimum wage takes that away.

This is true at any threshold, no matter how low. It is as true at ₹20,000 as it is for ₹1 lakh. It's true lower down the scale too. If we mandate wages for interns, the least advantaged interns will have fewer opportunities to pick up skills or experiences in internships. Since they now cost money, people will be more careful, giving internships out only to those with connections or skills that are 'worth it.'

If the theoretical argument doesn't convince you, there is plenty of evidence to back the theory. A 2006 review of minimum wage research concluded: "A sizable majority of studies... give a relatively consistent indication of negative employment effects of minimum wages..." [The] studies that focus on the least-skilled groups provide relatively overwhelming evidence of stronger unemployment effects for these groups." A review in 2022 echoes these findings.

If one doesn't trust reviews, there is evidence thrown up by the 'gold standard' of evidence—randomized control

trials (RCT). An RCT set up to study minimum wages also concluded that "a higher minimum wage raised the wages of hired workers; However, there was some reduction in hiring and large reductions in hours-worked... firms hired more productive workers... adversely affecting less productive workers."

We also have non-academic evidence from macro trends. Thirty years into its growth journey, by 2011 China had moved about 35% of its workforce away from agriculture to manufacturing and services. Thirty years after 1991, we had only moved 13%. Our labour laws, which, among other 'protections,' mandate minimum wages higher than market wages, have been a big reason why manufacturing employment didn't increase. This massive difference leaves hundreds of millions of people poorer than they need to be. It leaves women at home or in the fields, instead of employed in factories, securing their economic independence, like they are doing in Bangladesh.

How can we actually help workers? Luckily, we have a strong alternative for worker protection that requires no government intervention, yet works wonderfully well if we allow it to work. It's called 'having a better option.' Imagine telling your household help or security guard that you will cut their salary in half. They will immediately find someone who will pay them the going market rate and start working for them instead.

The best way to protect workers, therefore, is to create as much competition as possible for their time and effort. This doesn't mean we abandon worker protection, but we must focus our policy on maximizing worker choice. Every country that has made the transition from poor to middle income or rich status has realized this. The sooner we also realize that maximizing worker choice is the right policy option, not limiting it, the sooner Indians at large will transition to a standard of living that's at par with the world's best.



JUST A THOUGHT

The real tragedy of minimum wage laws is that they are supported by well-meaning groups who want to reduce poverty. But the people who are hurt most by higher minimums are the most poverty stricken.

MILTON FRIEDMAN

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

Contradictions bedevil Conservatives' tenure in the UK

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

In a country where small talk is usually about the weather, the seemingly South Asian monsoonal downpour that coincided with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's announcement of the UK election scheduled for 4 July still made for a spectacularly awkward statement outside 10 Downing Street. With the opposition Labour Party looking more energized under Keir Starmer than it has been since Tony Blair led it to a huge victory in 1997, there was more bad news to follow. Some 80 Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) announced they would not seek re-election. This meant the Conservatives were scrambling to line up candidates, while both Labour and the Liberal Democrats had their lists ready.

When Sunak took over in October 2022 after the almost-Maoist political chaos under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, whose tenure lasted six weeks, he was praised by many for being the only adult in the unruly classroom that the Conservative Party had become. But, the larger challenges faced by the UK

remain. Among them are a decline in public services, the need to allow more greenfield sites for housing—the lack of which makes London among the most unaffordable residential markets in the developed world—and revitalizing trade after the Tories took the calamitous decision to exit the EU.

An out-of-power Conservative party would be more at war with itself because its far-right wing will almost certainly (and incorrectly) blame a poll defeat on Sunak for not being hardline enough. As the late Tory leader Alan Clark observed in his history of the party, when the party is out of office, it "reverts, all too predictably, to cannibalism."

The party's dilemma is that its definition of being Conservative is wrapped in a flag of hypernationalism, which led to Brexit, and a sense of Britain too tied up with its past, rather than making a case for liberalizing the economy. *FT* columnist Janan Ganesh outlined these contradictions: "A conservative believes in home ownership but not in building houses on greenfield sites; in trade but not in the supranational regulations that smooth it. In each of these intellectual conflicts, this government has tended to prioritise tradition. [These decisions were] made with no awareness of the cost to growth."

The most glaring example is Brexit, of

course, but also the Conservatives' utterly hypocritical attitudes towards immigration. Pulling up the drawbridges to keep out Poles and other East Europeans from Britain underpinned the vote in favour of Brexit, even if the rhetoric was about sovereignty and illusory savings in the billions that could then be spent on the National Health Service. Last year, a parliamentary report outlined the trade picture since Brexit took effect. "Looking at longer term trends, the share of UK trade accounted for by the EU has fallen. Between 1999 and 2007, the EU accounted for 50-55% of UK exports. By 2022, this figure had fallen to 42%. The share of UK imports from the EU has also fallen since 1999, although by less than for exports."

While it is true that British exports to non-EU countries picked up in 2022, this was because of precious-metal exports to China, the UAE and Hong Kong. The irony that the country which defined and perverted colonial trade for two centuries saw

an uptick in trade because of commodity exports is rich indeed. Former prime minister Theresa May's first bilateral trip to New Delhi in November 2016, just months after taking over, to kick-start talks over a free trade agreement (FTA) with India always struck me as something out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel. Imagine walking out of the largest trade grouping in the world with your neighbours and then seeking a deal with a government that's among the most unenthusiastic about free trade. It seemed akin to professing to be afraid of water and then leaping into a surging river.

Leaving Brexit and chasing individual-country FTAs is also myopic in a world of supply chain integration where global buyers seek efficiencies and adhere to just-in-time inventory. They balk at form filling and delays that bedevil countries outside FTAs. One only has to look at Bangladesh's huge increase in garment exports and contrast this with India's stagnation to understand that this applies even to supposedly less

sophisticated exports. In this respect, we have more in common with our former colonial rulers than just cricket and *Yes Minister*. An inflated sense of our place on the global stage governs our respective world views. It is telling that Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have seen huge increases in trade with China, while trade with India has stagnated, as trade expert Amita Batra observes.

But the greatest contradiction in the UK's Conservative reign of error has been its much-touted 'hardline' on immigration. Soon after the election announcement, the government said its plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda would be delayed yet again. Brexit has had little effect reducing immigration; it has just meant immigrants come in large numbers from all over to help a labour-short economy, not just Europe. This is more equitable and has certainly helped Indians, who account for the largest number of work visas granted in 2023, at 163,500, versus 46,200 for Zimbabweans.

As muddled as Conservative policies have been, this sleight-of-hand liberalization of immigration could prove to be its most enduring positive legacy. The Labour Party is more sensible on immigration. Helped by newcomers from its former colonies, post-Brexit Britain may get a shot in the arm.

Bungled policies on trade and immigration have served the UK badly but Indians can still thank Tories



WORDLY WISE
THE BEST WAY TO EXECUTE FRENCH COOKING
IS TO GET GOOD AND LOADED AND WHACK
THE HELL OUT OF A CHICKEN. — JULIA CHILD

The IndianEXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NETANYAHU’S WAR

His government’s actions flout principles of justice and humanity, apart from isolating Israel

AT THE TIME, it had seemed the March 25 UN Security Council resolution on Gaza would mark a turning point. The demand for a humanitarian ceasefire was not vetoed by the US — it had nixed three such resolutions till then — which signaled that Washington’s support for the Benjamin Netanyahu government was not limitless. That perception was strengthened earlier this month when President Joe Biden drew a “red line” around Rafah, saying that a ground offensive against the southernmost city in Gaza would lead to the US stopping its arms supply to Israel. But when the red line was breached, it was moved: Israel bombed a shelter for refugees, killing 45 people, on Sunday and the White House said that this did not constitute a violation. Yet, it would be a mistake for Tel Aviv to confuse this apparently long rope for impunity. The October 7 attacks by Hamas generated global sympathy for it, but the thousands of civilian deaths, and mass displacement that followed, is increasingly isolating it from the global community.

Sunday night’s attack was gruesome even in a conflict that has brutalised sensitivities. Netanyahu’s claim that the attack was a “mishap” cuts little ice. The hard, maximalist position taken by the Netanyahu government — denying a two-state solution in principle as well as refusing to pause the attacks — is isolating Israel globally. His failure to bring back the remaining hostages, or capture the Hamas leadership, has made him unpopular at home. In fact, before the current conflict, Israel was expanding its ties with moderate states in the region through the Abraham Accords. It was also an important node in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi last year. These multilateral arrangements were the first step in turning the Middle East into a zone of connectivity and trade, not conflict. Netanyahu’s actions, the expansion of the conflict to the Red Sea and with Iran, have turned the clock back.

It is important to remember the Netanyahu government was facing a crisis of popularity and legitimacy before October 7, 2023. It had lost allies and there were massive protests over the government’s attempted judicial “reforms”. The PM himself faces corruption charges. Cynics might well believe that the prolonged conflict is a bid at political self-preservation. This politics through war, however, is hurting Israel’s interests internationally. Earlier this week, Spain, Ireland and Norway recognised the Palestinian state; the International Court of Justice has admitted a case accusing Israel of genocide and there has been a request for arrest warrants for war crimes for Netanyahu and others at the International Criminal Court. Protests against the Netanyahu government’s actions in universities and beyond — including and especially in the US — mean that there is a domestic political cost to supporting Israel, especially relevant for the US in an election year. The Netanyahu government’s attacks on civilians and the refusal to allow a ceasefire for even humanitarian aid is a form of unconscionable collective punishment for October 7. It flies against the principles of justice and humanity, and harms and diminishes Israel.

BEFORE THE NEXT STORM

Rise of multi-hazard disasters calls for disaster resilient infrastructure, empowered disaster management agencies

THE CREATION of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2005, prompted by the 1999 Odisha super cyclone and the 2004 tsunami, was a timely decision. Over the years, the NDMA has done commendable work in disaster mitigation, risk assessment and reduction, and post-disaster response, rescue and relief. It has also developed competencies in newer threats like heatwaves. Nearly every state now has a disaster management agency of its own, though some function less effectively than others. But the damage caused by landslides in the Northeast in the aftermath of cyclone Remal that hit the West Bengal coastline on Sunday night is the latest reminder of the urgent need to upgrade and overhaul the disaster management system.

The nature of disasters that the country faces has changed drastically in the last 20 years. Disasters, especially those that are a result of extreme weather events, have become more frequent and intense. Climate change has been playing an important role in exacerbating the impacts. Events that were not looked at as potential disasters earlier, like the summer heat, have emerged as new threats. The most worrying development has been the rise in what are known as multi-hazard disasters, one event triggering another, or a series of other disasters, the cascading impacts of which result in a destruction that is much higher in magnitude. Heavy rainfall leads to breach of glacial lakes and landslides in hilly areas which results in flash floods downstream. Or, extreme heatwave triggers largescale forest fires. The recent episode of landslides in the Northeastern region, which has claimed at least 30 lives, was a similar multi-hazard disaster. Cyclone Remal caused heavy rainfall in the area which triggered landslides at several locations.

Disaster management agencies need to be empowered to play a more pro-active role in dealing with these. More resources and capacity-building needs to flow in. There is little that can be done to prevent natural events, like extreme rainfall or cyclones or heatwaves. But man-made influences like unregulated construction can certainly be minimised. India is in the process of building infrastructure for its future. Resilience to disasters needs to be built into each of these. Old infrastructure also needs to be retrofitted. India has created an international organisation, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), specifically to promote disaster resilient infrastructure worldwide. It would be helpful to create the right templates at home first.

HOLD THE STEAK

The Olympic Village restaurant wants to give French cuisine a vegetarian makeover. Is the land of foie gras prepared?

BROCCOLI IS NO replacement for beef, but as the Paris Olympics draw closer, the country best known for dishes like steak tartare, boeuf bourguignon and blanquette de veau, is preparing for a vegetarian makeover. The trigger: The Olympics planning committee’s goal to cut emissions by 50 per cent, which means that food with a heavy carbon footprint — like beef and veal — will be reduced to 40 per cent of the menu in the restaurant that will serve the over 15,000 athletes arriving in July.

Charles Guillo, the chef in charge, has spoken in interviews of his desire to break the “false stereotype... that French gastronomy is meat, meat and only meat”. While it is true that among the classic French dishes are some vegetarian ones — for example, ratatouille or soupe à l’oignon — vegetables, in general, are something of an after-thought. On this matter, France, with the highest per capita consumption of beef and veal in Europe, has fallen behind. Others like Scandinavian countries have been quicker to embrace a less meat-dependent diet. This applies as much to home cooking as it does to fine dining. Currently, there is only one Michelin-starred vegetarian restaurant in all of France and the one vegan restaurant that was awarded a star, closed down a year after winning the honour.

It’s not just cultural pride that has fueled a disregard for plant-forward cooking in France. For the last few years, the meat industry has warily watched the plant-based food industry grow and even gone to court to keep these products from using meat-based descriptions like “sausage”. Guillo and Tony Estangoet, head of the organising committee for the Games, have both spoken of the responsibility to “educate” the people about planet-friendly eating habits. But this may take more than one sporting event, even if it is the biggest in the world.



FAISAL DEVJI

CRITICS OF THE Joe Biden administration routinely contrast the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, accusing the US of double standards in condemning Russian, but not Israeli attacks on civilians. But what is striking about these conflicts is not how differently Washington has been handling them but how similarly. In both cases, America opted for war rather than negotiations, leading its Western allies in supplying arms, funding, and diplomatic cover to Ukraine and Israel. Despite the carnage, both wars have reached a stalemate and are unlikely to achieve any of Kyiv’s or Tel Aviv’s stated military aims of complete victory. What does this double failure say about the changing international order and its possible future?

Taken together, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza show up the radical insufficiency of the political categories we use to understand them. A narrative about the revival of Russian imperialism, for instance, is countered by one about Ukraine collaborating with NATO to diminish Moscow. Claims of Palestinian terrorism aided by Iran’s alleged mission to destroy Israel is countered by the latter’s politics of apartheid and settler colonialism. And, all sides accuse each other of genocide.

However, none of these storylines can account for the direction in which these wars are going. Nor can they explain why the US has chosen to deal with them in exactly the same way, despite their very different histories and places within American foreign policy.

The US has chosen to globalise these conflicts in the name of restricting their spread. It has done so by mobilising international support for Ukraine and Israel only to divide the world instead. Both Russia’s invasion and Hamas’s attack appeared to ignore the global contexts of these long-standing conflicts to focus on their regional dimension. Just as the Minsk Agreements do not now frame Russian policy on Ukraine, neither do the Abraham Accords define Arab views on Gaza. And the world’s divided response to these wars only consolidates their regional character, since countries refusing to follow American instruction consider neither to be a global threat. Only the West’s support of one party over another threatens to turn each into a global conflict.

Astonishing about this refusal, especially from countries in the so-called Global South, is how many of them are US or Western allies and even client states. Also notable is the fact that most do not phrase their choice in terms of siding with one party or another in the style of the Cold War. Turkey can be part of NATO

US response in Ukraine, Gaza exposes cracks in global order, move towards regionalisation of geopolitics

The fact that the US possesses no rival has regionalised geopolitics by removing the possibility of great-power competition from it. While we tend to date economic and cultural forms of globalisation to the end of the Cold War, this event paradoxically led to the collapse of global politics as well. With the world no longer divided into two blocs and a few non-aligned countries, regionalisation has emerged after the last American effort to re-globalise politics in the War on Terror. It has been focussed throughout on heading off all potential rivals and forestalling the emergence of another bipolar or even multipolar international order.

and sell drones to Ukraine while still refusing to sanction Russia. Similarly, it can oppose Israel’s war in Gaza while maintaining diplomatic (and until recently, trade) relations with it. Instead of seeing such behaviour as erratic and hypocritical, we should acknowledge that Turkey is one of many such state actors who seem to have brought neutrality back to geopolitics for the first time since it was banished during the War on Terror.

What is called neutrality in the case of Ukraine is manifested in calls for a ceasefire in the case of Gaza. In either case, the effect is to recognise and reinforce each war’s regional character and thus reduce its potential for expansion. But this can only happen at the expense of Ukraine as much as Israel, both of which would be forced to accommodate themselves to a new regional order. The irony of this for the latter, of course, is that the Abraham Accords were also meant to set up a regional order, but one in which Israel would be the linchpin. But such regionalisation would render the unipolar international order in which America conducts itself as a global power irrelevant. This explains why the US insists on re-globalising both conflicts by intervening and further militarising them. Defending Ukraine and Israel might be deeply-felt commitments, but they do not exhaust the meaning of such intervention.

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If geopolitics is not working in the way the West expected, it is because the rest of the world is moving in a different direction. The real threat to a unipolar international order comes not from a bipolar or multipolar future in which politics remains global, but from the latter’s collapse in the face of regionalisation.

Rather than seeking to replace the Cold War’s remaining pole in great-power competition, America’s rivals are trying to circumvent it without necessarily reducing it. They are treating it not as a model for their own future but as a remnant from the past. Whether or not any country entertains the ambition of succeeding the US, for the foreseeable future, its politics can only be one of evading the latter’s power.

Middle powers like China, Russia, India, and Brazil are all actors in regional political arenas and cannot project military force much beyond them. Most do not even exercise hegemony over their own neighbourhoods. China may be economically integrated in its region, but it only has North Korea, and occasionally, Pakistan as allies. India, similarly, finds itself in a largely hostile neighbourhood in which it lacks even economic integration. To escape the limits of its regional influence, India reaches out to powers outside it. Only Russia appears to enjoy some kind of regional hegemony in Central Asia and parts of the Caucasus and eastern Europe, serving as the poor cousin to US’s transatlantic hegemony over the West.

While the US has been focussed on a global threat to its unipolarity, the real danger it faces comes from the loss of global politics. This threat does not arise from isolationism but globalisation itself. It is because economic and technological relations have moved beyond the reach of states, as the failure of sanctions on Iran and Russia demonstrates, that politics can now become regional. The US’s response to this is to attempt their re-globalisation, but it can only do so by supporting war in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Its deployment of force to reestablish the *status quo ante*, however, has not succeeded and is doing little more than collapsing US hegemony and its global role in the international order.

The regionalisation of the international order does not mean it will be any more peaceful than the global one built to contain the Cold War. The task before the US today is to do what it has already done twice following each of the World Wars, and create a new international order founded on a balance of power. But this time that balance must be struck not between empires as with the League of Nations, nor between superpowers as with the United Nations, but among the regions and middle powers which now define geopolitics.

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D RAJA

IN THE LAST 10 years of the BJP’s misrule, our constitutional framework has come under unprecedented strain. After targeting our sense of belonging through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and distorting our shared history, the BJP is now bent on debasing the integrity of our institutions, including constitutional ones. Its assault on the electoral process is multifaceted, meant to undermine its integrity. Coupled with undermining institutions like the Parliament and state assemblies, this serves the purpose of eroding the foundations of our parliamentary democracy.

The BJP tried to corrupt the political arena through the now unconstitutional electoral bonds scheme. Next came “One nation, one election”, which dilutes the federal character of our republic and impedes the autonomy of both the voter’s franchise and the elected state governments. A more frontal attack on the integrity of elections came in the form of The CEC and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023, which gave the central government a majority vote in the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was conceived as a strong, independent and permanent body deriving its authority directly

WHAT EC MUST GUARANTEE

Independence of crucial institutions is necessary to safeguard citizens’ interests

ECI holds a vast mandate and power when it comes to the conduct of free and fair elections. The extent of ECI’s power is such that it cancelled a by-election to the R K Nagar assembly constituency in Tamil Nadu in 2017 when it saw the electoral process being “seriously vitiated” by the use of money power. It is disheartening to see the same body behaving in the manner it has by neglecting serious violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by leaders of the BJP. The BJP and PM Narendra Modi started their campaign by repeatedly invoking the Ram Temple issue but the ECI took no note of it. However, to the BJP’s great shock, people prioritised issues of livelihood like employment, price rise and the 10 years of BJP misrule etc. Their refusal to be swayed by the Ram Temple issue made the BJP and Modi desperate and they resorted to the only thing they know — polarisation. Overnight, the BJP dropped Modi’s guarantees and the Viskit Bharat rhetoric and started fuelling hatred and divisions. The PM openly made anti-minority remarks and baselessly claimed that the Opposition alliance will give wealth to Muslims if voted to power. These remarks not only violated the MCC but also the spirit of secularism and equality enshrined in the Constitution.

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I wrote to the CEC on April 23, seeking action against Modi and the BJP for violating the MCC. In response, the ECI sent a notice, not to Modi, who made the provocative remarks, but to BJP President JP Nadda, asking him to “bring to the notice of all your star campaigners to set high standards of political discourse and observe provisions of MCC in letter and spirit”. In the past, such notices and censures were issued directly to the campaigner who violated the MCC. Further, the ECI issued a similar notice to Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge.

The mandate of the people goes beyond changing the government — it is crucial to protect the character of our nation, which was built by the sacrifices of our freedom fighters. Ideals like equality, secularism, welfare, federalism and social justice are vital for progress. Independence and integrity of crucial institutions are necessary if citizens’ interests are to be safeguarded. Free and fair voting is the cornerstone of our democracy and the ECI is the instrument to ensure that right provided by the Constitution. As we see institutional erosion all around us, the ECI should serve the people according to its mandate.

The writer is General Secretary, CPI



MAY 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

2 BSF JAWANS KILLED

TERRORISTS KILLED SEVEN people, including two Border Security Force jawans, and injured seven persons in extremist activity in Punjab in the last 24 hours. The two BSF jawans and a civilian were killed when terrorists opened fire on a BSF picket in Tarn Taran. Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi expressed her unhappiness to the Punjab Governor B D Pande over the handling of the Punjab situation.

A DIPLOMATIC GAFFE

INDIA HAS CONVEYED to Bangladesh its “profound regret” over the violent incidents

at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, in which volunteers of the “Hindu Manch” damaged the mission building. Foreign Secretary M Rasgotra met the Bangladesh High Commissioner Air Marshal A K Khandekar and conveyed to him that the Indian government regretted the incident. Rasgotra assured him that full protection would be provided to the diplomatic mission.

RIOTS IN J&K

ONE PERSON WAS killed and one seriously injured when the police opened fire in Srinagar to quell violent mobs. Two persons

were injured in the firing. One of them succumbed to his injuries. The police resorted to firing when lathicharge and teargas failed to disperse the mob that set fire to the office of the deputy superintendent of police.

THACKERAY’S CLAIM

SHIV SENA CHIEF Bal Thackeray feels that if he is arrested on some criminal charges, it would only lead to “further chaos”. He said that if the government desired to take action, it could have done so immediately after his so-called provocative speech. The delayed action proved that the “government has wilted under communal pressure.”

THE IDEAS PAGE

The vacation red herring

Blaming court holidays for pendency distracts from the deeper structural problems that ail the judiciary



MAJA DARUWALA

AS WE BEGIN this summer's court break, the debate about how much time judges actually put in on the Bench has been rekindled by a casual remark from a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, who said that judges work only for a few hours a day, take long vacations and need to modernise.

The question of whether judges sit for 200 days or 365 is a red herring. It spins court timings and vacations to mean "this is why there are arrears". It creates the impression that if judges stayed longer on their benches, instead of swanning off on holiday, arrears would magically disappear and all would be well. To respond by saying that judges are overburdened and need to blow off steam in fine holiday spots while litigants languish plays into a manufactured imagery of lack of accountability or discipline amongst a pampered privileged elite.

True, a few more weeks of active sittings or even uninterrupted court time is not a bad idea and will go some way towards placating those chafing under delays. But too many other things that have lain unattended at the door of both the judiciary and the executive, are more responsible for the problem of arrears than judges' vacations.

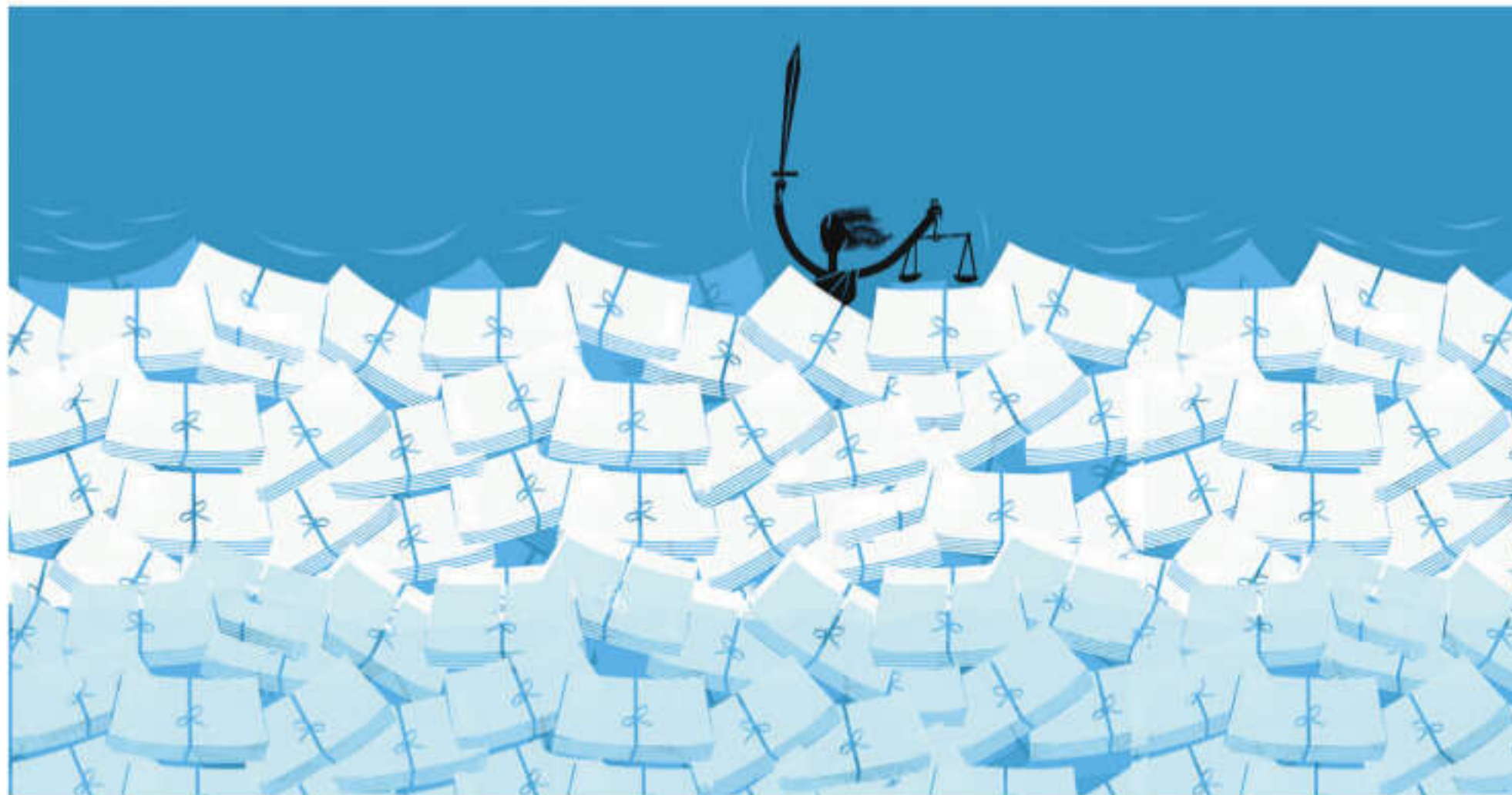
For one, there is the vexed question of too few judges. No state has its full complement of judges: Not in the high courts and not in our many lower courts. High court vacancies average 30 per cent but can touch nearly 50 per cent. Subordinate court vacancies average 22 per cent. But Bihar and Meghalaya clock in vacancies above 30 per cent — ongoing for over three years. According to the India Justice Report, as of June 2020, on average, a case remained pending in the subordinate courts for three years and in high courts, at 2022 figures, for five years.

Litigants want a quick resolution to their issues, but with pendency being what it is they can't hope to get it and overburdened judges can't give it.

Shortfall in judges is measured against "sanctioned" strength — the number designated as necessary, given the workload. However, as long ago as 1987, the 120th report of the Law Commission recommended there should be 50 judges per 10 lakh population. At just 15 judges per 10 lakh population nearly four decades later, even this hugely inadequate figure has not been reached. Meanwhile, each of India's BRICs partners has way more judges to serve their populations.

Several other factors contribute to the problem, including the types and complexity of cases each judge must deal with, and the stratagems used by lawyers to prolong trials for their clients' advantage. Courtrooms are being built, but are still in short supply and too many in use are sub-optimal. Nationally, support staff shortages average 26 per cent. One court clerk or one typist missing anywhere means delay becomes inevitable, however diligent the judge.

Quality deficits amplify structural inadequacies. Uneven acumen in both language and



C R Sasikumar

learning at the bar and the bench leads to endless procedural delays while the mismatch between proficiency of language, clarity of argument and final outcome opens the door to ever more appeals.

A permissive and perhaps collusive culture within the legal fraternity allows unjustified applications, endless adjournments and unmeritorious appeals to proliferate. It is routine for pleadings and paper books to grow into small mountains. So too with judgments, whose length may often be inverse to their learning. In all this, eventually, it is the dispensation of justice that suffers.

Meanwhile, the great hope of technology remains hostage to slow and uneven adoption, erratic electricity, uneven bandwidth and user resistance.

Solutions require state and central governments to come together, to at least attempt to find answers. A few are mentioned here.

Excessive government litigation presently accounts for roughly 50 per cent of the court load. Attempts to trim and rationalise this have been going on for a while. In the absence of comprehensive publicly available data, or cost-benefit analysis, it is hard to know whether they have led to any significant downsizing of the sprawling government docket or what incentives and disincentives would rationalise it.

Every new legislation adds its own slice of litigation. New bills rarely ever assess the additional load that will fall on the courts. The practice of assessing possible financial and time implications and putting this out to the public at the pre-legislative stage would, perhaps, lead to better-drafted laws and early plans being laid for better outcomes. Cleaning out outdated laws and procedures also helps to reduce cases.

Judges are trained to be adjudicators, not administrators. A permanent administrative secretariat headed by a qualified court manager within each court, on whom the senior judge can rely, has proved a winner in many jurisdictions abroad where court management is a specialised career option. Long-term court managers who can free the bench of many tedious tasks and a design for maximum efficiency are solutions worth universalising.

For one, there is the vexed question of too few judges. No state has its full complement of judges: Not in the high courts and not in our many lower courts. High court vacancies average 30 per cent but can touch nearly 50 per cent. Subordinate court vacancies average 22 per cent. Bihar and Meghalaya clock in vacancies above 30 per cent — ongoing for over three years. According to the India Justice Report, as of June 2020, on average a case remained pending in the subordinate courts for three years and in high courts, at 2022 figures, for five years.

On the quality side, there is a strong case to be made for higher standards being set at the entry level before anyone can grace a bench, whether high or low, or before being allowed to practise before a court. The growing number of appeals and admonitions meted out for ignoring procedure, not knowing the law and dressing up opinion as legal rationale says much more about the fault lines embedded in the system than about the individuals who have been allowed to run it.

Spending more money on justice delivery is, of course, a no-brainer but resource-strapped governments do not prioritise ramping up efficiencies in justice delivery. The India Justice Report estimates that the overall per capita spending on judiciary stands at less than Rs 150. It remains to be evaluated whether this subsistence-level budgeting is penny-wise or pound-foolish.

The eye-watering five million-plus cases pending have prompted all sorts of experiments and sudden ad hoc efforts: Compulsory pre-trial mediation, Lok Adalats, specialist courts, the winnowing out of petty cases, ironing out burdensome procedural bottlenecks as the apex court has done recently when it directed the electronic communication of bail orders directly to prisons; prioritising old cases and cases where delay will bring about loss of liberty and irreparable harm to one or other party, and ever more tribunals. Yet, too often, saddled with the same structural shortfalls, starved of money and manpower, heavy workloads and deficient domain knowledge, specialised efforts like consumer and POCOS courts limp along, while their own arrears end up in the same dire straits.

The rising tide of litigation is often cited as one more reason for inescapable delay. In a rule-of-law country, it is everyone's right to have their day in court. Across the world, as incomes and ownership rise and commerce and industry grow, recourse to formal systems of adjudication increases and must be welcomed because it signals trust in a robust system of conflict resolution. This is inevitable, foreseeable and with prudent planning — not finger-pointing — could be manageable.

The writer is editor-in-chief, India Justice Report

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"People of conscience in the East and West must unite to economically and militarily boycott Israel for its shameless spilling of Palestinian blood. If concrete steps are not taken, then we must await the next atrocity." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

Punjab, unlike other states

It has no alliances, no vote banks based on religion and caste. It has been known to resist a national electoral wave



PRAMOD KUMAR

PUNJAB HAS CARVED an electoral path of its own. Here, there are no alliances amongst political parties, no INDIA bloc and no NDA, no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste, even as there are the same tribes of party-hoppers and footloose voters. The national narrative of *Ram Mandir nirman*, Mandal, OBC reservation or apprehensions of subversion of the Constitution are hardly a part of the mainstream narrative in the state. It has a story of farmers' grievances, sharing of river waters, transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, and Indo-Pak trade apart from issues of infrastructure development, quality education, drug de-addiction, and youth engagement. All these are being garnished with the incumbent AAP's Delhi Model of governance for the state.

Punjab has a rich history of political mergers, alliances and coalitions. The formation of such alliances goes back to colonial Punjab. Uneasy, but many times historically necessary alliances were arrived at. In reorganised Punjab, four post-election coalitions between 1967 and 1980, and three pre-election coalitions during 1997 and 2019 were formed between the BJP and Akali Dal. At the national level, however, the coalition became central to the putting together of the government in the period post-1989, with 1977 an exception.

Unlike many other states, Punjab has had no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste. These categories are intertwined and enmeshed. For instance, Scheduled Castes constitute more than 33 per cent of the total population and are segmented into Mazhabis, Chamars, Adharmis and Balmikis and are not represented by any caste-based party. The vote share of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has been continuously declining. It has come down from 8 per cent in 2004 to 3.53 per cent in 2012 and 2 per cent in 2019. Data shows that the majority of SC legislators have got elected from parties other than the BSP — around 16 per cent of the SC members between 1967 and 2022 belonged to the BJP, 28 per cent to the Akalis, 23 per cent to Congress.

Punjab does not prop up an exclusive Hindu vote bank. In the 2014 Parliament elections, the BJP could not garner votes of urban Hindus even when the Hindutva wave was sweeping other parts of the country. Reformism within Hindus was guided more by the search for an identity to defend their faith from Christian missionaries, Islam and the Sanatan orthodoxy. This can be attributed to the role played by religious reform movements, particularly Sikhism, Arya Samaj, and Brahma Samaj. Hindus have dominant traits of Sikhism, and a normative behaviour influenced by the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma both.

Thus, given that Punjab's electoral politics shows the blurring of religious and caste fault-lines, mobilising the people as part of exclusive categories, like Hindu traders or SCs, may not bring the desired electoral results.

There is a four-cornered contest as the political parties have not entered into alliances. Congress and the AAP decided to go solo after their alliance talks could not

reach fruition as the Punjab unit of Congress opposed it. It argued that an alliance with the AAP would negate the mandate of the people to perform the role of the opposition. In turn, it would help the Akalis to emerge as the main opposition and encash the anti-incumbency faced by the AAP government. It was argued by the Congress leadership that it would have been suicidal to barter its support base for a short-term advantage at the national level. In Punjab, Congress is the frontrunner in more than half of the constituencies.

The AAP created a new binary in the 2022 Assembly elections, that is, traditional parties versus the party for change. It clubbed all parties, ranging from Congress and Akalis to BJP, and branded them as corrupt. Now, after two years in power, the AAP in Punjab appears to have lost the plot. However, its performance in the ongoing polls will largely depend on its paternalistic welfareism, whereby freebies have been offered across the population. How far will the implementation of free electricity for all, upto 300 units, give dividends to AAP, is the question.

The Akalis and the BJP could not enter into an alliance as the Akali Dal insisted on conditions, including legal guarantees for MSP for crops and release of Sikh prisoners after completion of their jail terms.

The emergence of the regional space has been largely influenced by the farmers' protests, which acted as one of the filters for the alliance between the BJP and SAD. The BJP has to regionalise its agenda, as the narrative of Ram Mandir and its corporatised approach to agriculture may have implications for election outcomes. The Akalis have a regional agenda, with issues relating to federalism, Indo-Pak trade, crisis of agriculture and increasing youth unemployment. It may also be able to consolidate its panthic constituency.

The BJP does not have a Punjab-specific agenda, particularly for the Punjabi Hindus, who, unlike other minorities, do not suffer any sense of persecution or siege. Merely importing turbaned Sikh leaders may not transform it into a Punjab party. It has the advantage of having Sunil Jakhar as BJP state president, known for his sharp pro-Punjab positioning. But the non-fulfilment of promises of doubling the income of farmers and legalising MSPs has returned to haunt the BJP.

The absence of an alliance between the Akalis and the BJP may have provided fodder to the radicals. In this election, the fringe radicals are getting a notable response from the youth, mainly in Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot constituencies. Their main emphasis is on the denial of justice to the Bandi Sikhs (Sikh prisoners incarcerated in various cases for years), exodus of youth from Punjab and the migration to the state of labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The mainstream political parties have allowed the fringe radicals to appropriate space in the religious or panthic constituency. The negation of the agenda of peace and communal harmony, and one-upmanship in power politics, has weakened the moderate space. This is disquieting.

The four-cornered contest between the Akalis, BJP, Congress and AAP will lead to a division of votes. The Congress appears to be the major beneficiary, followed by the AAP and the Akalis might be able to consolidate their support base. The BJP may, on limited seats, gain from this flux.

The writer is chairperson, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh



SEEMA MUNDOLI

In heat island, a green oasis

Parks provide respite in the summer. They must be made more accessible

OUR POPULAR IMAGINATION of parks is as spaces for rest and recreation. But in cities such as Bengaluru, they are also important from an ecology and equity perspective. It is, therefore, unfortunate that little attention is paid to these pockets of greenery that contribute to making life bearable in a rapidly concretising city. Equally concerning is that parks are becoming battlegrounds for determining who can access them, for what purposes and at what times of the day.

Cubbon Park and Lal Bagh are historical landmarks in the city. If Bengaluru can still cling to the moniker of "Garden City", it is owing to the continued existence of these parks. But scattered across neighbourhoods are also smaller parks in different shapes and sizes that are tucked away in quieter nooks or flanked by roads, houses, and shops. The tree cover is often a mix of native and exotic species with flowering species adding a splash of colour and canopies providing shade that sometimes extend across almost half an acre. In the better-maintained ones, we can see more footfall — mostly residents who live nearby and frequent the park for walks, the elderly conversing on the benches, pet owners walking their dogs, and children playing. More recently, open-air gyms with a variety of exercise machines have been introduced in these spaces as well.

Whatever the different spatial, ecological, or demographic dimensions, one common feature of most neighbourhood parks in Bengaluru is the timing. They remain

open only for a few hours in the morning and in the evening. For the rest of the day, the gates of these fenced parks remain firmly shut — and locked.

Urban Lab at the Centre for Science and Environment's recent report highlights how rising temperatures together with relative humidity pose a deadly combination in six megacities including Bengaluru. The city has seen of 0.5 degrees C increase in decadal ambient temperature, and relative humidity has marginally contributed to overall heat discomfort. Coupled with this is the urban heat island effect — the result of an increase in built-up areas because of urbanisation.

Temperatures in Bengaluru city have been breaking records this summer — going as high as 41.8 degrees C. While rainfall brought some relief last week, the days continue to be uncomfortably hot making parks scattered across the city appear like refreshing oases. In reality, however, they are more of a mirage because when the sun is at its peak, the parks remain closed denying access to people who desperately need the shade in the day.

These include the *pourakarmikas* who work in the sweltering heat to keep our city clean, the construction workers engaged in endless repair work on the roads, and gig workers who could do with a brief respite while rushing between deliveries. Heat risk and strokes can be debilitating, even fatal. Recognising this, the Labour Department of Kerala in April this year rescheduled work

timings banning any work in the open between 12 pm and 3 pm. But can a gig worker afford the luxury of working fewer hours?

Timing is not the only restriction. A common sight on entering many of these parks is a board prominently displayed with a list of prohibited activities. Some of them are understandable considering the park is a public space such as warnings against alcohol consumption, smoking, throwing plastic and other waste, and damaging trees. Others seem unreasonable such as prohibiting the plucking of flowers, sitting or walking on grass, or bringing in eatables. In some parks, perhaps because of the smaller size, the rules border on bizarre — such as children being prohibited from playing or riding a bicycle! Another issue that especially splits residents is regarding allowing entry to pets, especially dogs.

Parks are public spaces where urban residents from all walks of life can unwind and relax — potential places for social bonding among people. So we should be concerned that they are turning into mini battle-grounds instead.

We need to collectively rethink park use and access in Bengaluru — and reimagine them as multiuse green spaces accessed by different groups at different times of the day. Parks need protection from being converted to other forms of land use and from being increasingly concretised. Should the limited space in the neighbourhood park be retained as green cover to mitigate the impacts of rising temperatures and the urban heat island

effect? Or should the trees and plants be removed to accommodate exercise machines? Parks can be for recreation — walking, exercising or spending an evening with family. They are also ideal from an educational perspective for children, especially from schools in the neighbourhood who can learn about the natural world.

Even a small patch of green in their neighbourhood park is a perfect field site for observing biodiversity from insects to birds to mammals. Parks can be a refuge for urban residents from all walks of life. For office goers, they are a perfect spot to have lunch under the shade of a tree before heading back to a walled office. They provide succour for the city's vulnerable population such as the *pourakarmikas*, construction labour and gig workers giving them a respite, however brief, from the scorching heat while at work.

Getting different groups to agree on the use and maintenance of a park will not be easy. But we need to take the first step, however tiny, in making parks more accessible and inclusive, not to mention ecologically rich. The more people access parks with a sense of ownership, the more eyes on the park there will be which will in turn contribute to making them safer. But we also want these eyes to be kind, and inclusive, allowing different groups to access parks freely throughout the day.

The writer is faculty, Azim Premji University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DIFFERENT TIME

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Sing a political song' (IE, May 29). The era of the Hindi film songs depicting the nation's popular mood, satirising politicians and taking the powers that be to account is long gone. The writers of songs used to be well-versed in the long tradition of defiant poetry in Urdu and Hindi. Poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, Shakeel Badauni, Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Neeraj were among those who enriched Hindi film songs. Closer to the common man, they translated his aspirations and frustrations well. The early decades of Independence were marked by socialism and patriotism. This is a far cry from today when any criticism of those in power is synonymous to sedition.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

ROSY PICTURE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Elections then and now' (IE, May 29). The article presents a rather rose-tinted view of past elections, implying that they were simpler and more straightforward com-

pared to the complexities of contemporary politics. However, this portrayal conveniently overlooks the significant flaws and challenges that existed during those times. The article downplays the seriousness of defections in current politics by suggesting that they are merely a part of the "winning strategy". In reality, defections undermine the democratic process.

Saurabh Shekhar, New Delhi

THE HEAT IS ON

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The heat stress'. The country has already far exceeded the normal week or two period of heatwaves it experiences, with temperatures breaching the 50 degree Celsius mark. India has national guidelines on heatwaves, explicitly laying out the roles and duties of the central and state government agencies, district administrations, local self-governments, NGOs, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. However, it is the responsibility of the states at the district magistrates' level to take measures to reduce loss of life due to heatwaves and maintain data on deaths.

Khokan Das, Kolkata



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Not just Delhi: temperature records are tumbling across the world

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

THE EXTREMELY high temperatures recorded in New Delhi in the last two days are extraordinary. But they are in keeping with the global trend in the last couple of years that has seen record-breaking temperatures being reported from several locations across the world.

For example, the United Kingdom crossed 40 degree Celsius for the first time ever in July 2022. A small town in China's northwest recorded 52 degree Celsius last year, the highest ever for that country. In 2021, Sicily in Italy recorded 48.8 degree Celsius, the highest for Europe ever. These are just a few examples.

An analysis by *Carbon Brief*, a UK-based publication focused on climate change, last year showed that nearly 40% of the Earth had recorded its highest-ever daily temperature between 2013 to 2023. This includes places in Antarctica as well. The highest temperature in India, in Rajasthan's Phalodi, was also recorded during this period.

However, the highest ever temperature recorded anywhere on Earth, 56.7 degree

Celsius in a place called Death Valley in the desert of California, United States, was recorded more than 100 years ago, in 1913.

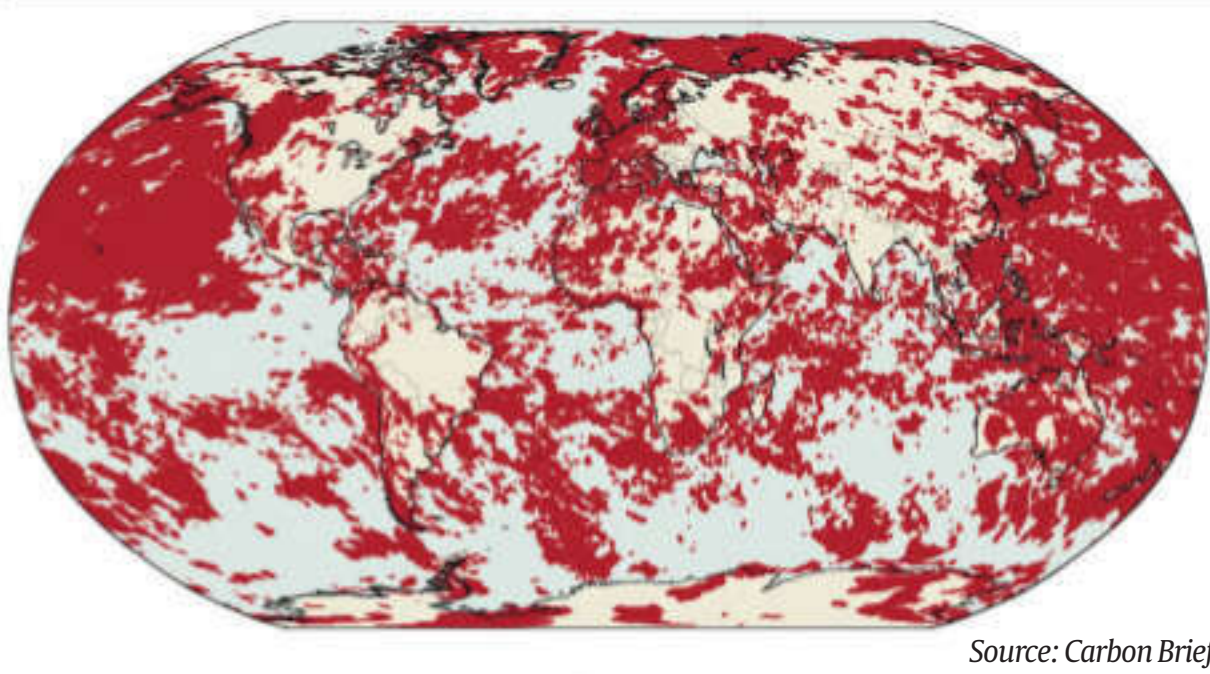
Delhi Anomaly

If the 52.9 degree Celsius recorded at one of the stations in Delhi on Wednesday is verified, it would be an all time high for India. But as of now it is suspect. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said it was checking the authenticity of the reading by an automatic weather station in Mungeshpur, located on the northern outskirts of Delhi, bordering Haryana.

The doubts over the Mungeshpur reading stems mainly from the fact that none of the other stations in Delhi — there are 20 of them — recorded a temperature that was close to 52.9 degree Celsius. The maximum temperature in other stations of Delhi on Wednesday was recorded by the Najafgarh station, which gave a reading of 49.1 degree Celsius. The station that is taken to be representative of Delhi — Safdarjung — showed a maximum temperature of 46.8 degree Celsius. This itself was an 80-year record, the highest since 1944.

Even if the Mungeshpur data was not so

RED EVERYWHERE: 40% OF THE WORLD SAW THEIR HIGHEST TEMPERATURE ON RECORD IN THE 10 YEARS FROM 2013-2023



Source: Carbon Brief

overtly suspicious — and IMD officials admit it is — a record-breaking temperature like this would have needed a verification. Met offices across the world do a double-check on any such extreme weather event. It took a few days for the UK record to be officially confirmed by the UK Met office. The Sicily

temperature record for Europe became official only in January this year, almost three years after it was recorded.

But record-breaking or not, there is no doubt about the fact that Delhi, and indeed most of northern India, is going through one of the worst heatwaves. In most places, maxi-

mum temperatures are 5 to 10 degree Celsius above normal. Wednesday was the fourth consecutive day when the Safdarjung station recorded a temperature well above 45 degree Celsius. The fact that temperatures have not been record-breaking is no consolation for populations reeling under increasingly prolonged and severe heatwave conditions.

"It is very concerning that annual trends in heatwaves now show temperature departures of 5-9 degree Celsius from the normal summer weather... Heatwaves are clearly the single largest threat to India's well-being today," said Aarti Khosla, director of Climate Trends, a climate organisation.

"Temperatures in Delhi and neighbouring NCR states in the last two days are proof that the issue is now about survivability," she said.

Global Warming

The year 2024 was predicted to be extremely warm. Last year had emerged as the warmest year on record, globally, and the effect was expected to continue this year as well. And so far, it has.

April 2024 was the 11th consecutive month when the global average monthly temperature for that month touched a new record, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service, an agency of the European

Commission. The one year period between May 2023 to April 2024 was warmer than any previous 12-month period, about 1.61 degree Celsius higher than the pre-industrial (1850-1900) average.

The warming over India is not as pronounced as the world taken as a whole. Annual mean temperatures over India have risen by about 0.7 degree Celsius compared to 1900 levels. This is significantly lower than the 1.59 degree Celsius rise for average land temperatures across the world. If oceans too are included, global temperatures right now are at least 1.1 degree Celsius higher than pre-industrial averages.

However, heatwaves over India are noticeably more severe. In 2023, heatwave conditions prevailed even in February, technically a winter month for which heatwave thresholds are not even defined because they are not expected.

The current spell of high temperatures in Delhi, and most of north India, looks anomalous mainly because it is being compared to normal temperatures that are based on averages of 1981-2010 period. Going forward, 45 degree Celsius plus temperatures are likely to very quickly become the new normal, and a 50 degree Celsius reading will no longer look suspicious.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

ANCIENT EGYPTIANS MIGHT HAVE TRIED TO TREAT BRAIN CANCER: STUDY

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

ANALYSIS OF a 4,600-year-old Egyptian skull has revealed signs of brain cancer and its treatment, according to a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Medicine* on Wednesday.

Using a microscope, scientists Edgard Camarós, Tatiana Tondini, and Albert Isidro found cut marks around the skull's edges surrounding dozens of lesions that earlier researchers had linked to metastasized brain cancer.

The discovery provides further insight into Ancient Egyptian medicine, and possibly pushes back the timeline of humanity's documented attempts to treat cancer by up to a thousand years.

"There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, because we knew what we had just discovered," Camarós, a palaeopathologist at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, told *The New York Times*.

Medicine in Ancient Egypt

It has long been known that ancient Egyptians had fairly detailed knowledge of the human body and its afflictions. For instance, "it is clear according to preserved papyri and hieroglyphs that ancient Egyptian medicine was advanced enough to describe, classify and successfully treat specific diseases and traumatic injuries, including bone trauma," the study said.

According to Dr Khaled Elsayad, "Specialised physicians would take a medical history, perform a manual examination, and assess clinical/vital findings to diagnose a disease. The range of conditions treated and the various conservative and surgical treatments used are astounding" ("What Ancient Egyptian Medicine Can Teach Us", published in *JCO Global Oncology*, 2023).

He further wrote: "Ancient Egyptians

understood the importance of maintaining good hygiene and eating habits for good health. The emphasis on healthy food, sport, personal hygiene, daily body cleansing, and mouthwash is still relevant today."

Despite ancient Egypt cultivating one of the most advanced medical knowledge bases known in Antiquity, cancer represented a "clear medical frontier" concerning diagnosis and treatment. The *Edwin Smith Papyrus*, considered to be the oldest medical surgical treatise in the world dated to around 3,600 years ago, refers to what many researchers believe to be a cancer case. The text describes it as "a grave disease" for which there "was no treatment."

Attempts to treat cancer

Yet, the latest discovery suggests that ancient Egyptians might have tried to treat the disease, even if unsuccessfully.

"Reliable perimortem [at or near death] cut marks on the bone surface have been identified in clear association with the metastatic lesions [cancer] on the posterior cranial region. The position of the marks, running through two of the lesions with a clear associated start and end at both sides of the lesions, suggest some kind of perimortem anthropic [human] intervention... which might indicate medical surgical exploration or an attempt of care or treatment," the study said.

However, the authors caution that they cannot, with certainty, tell the exact timing of the cutting. It is possible, the cut marks which were made using metal tools, indicate postmortem exploration of the cancerous tumour and its pathology.

"We have two possibilities: in a way that they tried to treat it, or in a way that they tried to medically understand it, in terms of probably treating it in the future," Camarós said. "I think that's a milestone in the history of medicine."

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SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

IN THE quarters leading up to the elections scheduled for 2004, India's economy was growing at around 8%, its forex reserves were healthy, Atal Bihari Vajpayee's popularity was soaring, and the opposition was in disarray. But warning signals too, were flashing: there was resentment among several sections of the people, and rising tension between the BJP and its ideological fount, the RSS.

The Prime Minister's advisers persuaded him that India was "shining", and he called elections six months early in 2004. The so-called "feelgood factor" failed to deliver, and the BJP lost. India got a new Prime Minister for the next 10 years — Dr Manmohan Singh.

The election of 2004

This election saw two historic reforms. Electronic voting machines (EVMs) replaced paper ballots at all seats across the country, and the Supreme Court made it compulsory for candidates to declare their full assets and liabilities, and details of criminal cases against them, in their nomination papers.

A four-phase election was held between April 20 and May 10, 2004, in which 58.07% of the country's 67.14 crore electors turned out. The BJP could win only 138 seats, and the NDA 181.

The Congress won 145 seats, CPI(M) 43, Samajwadi Party 35, and BSP 19. Rahul Gandhi entered Lok Sabha for the first time, winning in Amethi. Sonia Gandhi won in Rae Bareilly.

Sonia's Congress worked hard to cobble together a coalition that could form the government. The Left played a key role in the creation of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), comprising more than a dozen parties. Sonia put her ambitions aside to hand the reins of the government to Manmohan Singh, and herself became chairperson of the UPA.

Singh took oath on May 22, 2004. CPI(M) veteran Somnath Chatterjee was elected Speaker, even though his party was not part of the government. To give Sonia a rank equal to that of a Cabinet minister, Singh appointed her chairperson of the government's National Advisory Council (NAC).

Reforms and nuclear deal

The UPA government carried out landmark reforms, including passing the Right To Information Act in 2005, and the



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, Sonia Gandhi, and other leaders after being sworn in on May 22, 2004. PIB

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Education Act in 2009. Also in 2009, the government implemented, under great pressure from the Minister for Human Resource Development Arjun Singh, 27% reservation for OBCs in admission to higher education institutions.

The signing of the civilian nuclear deal with the United States in July 2008 led to the CPI(M) pulling support to the government. The government called a special session of Parliament on July 21-22, and the CPI(M) asked Speaker Chatterjee to resign. He refused, and the CPI(M) expelled its 10-term MP. The government won the confidence vote 275-256.

Churn in the BJP

The shock defeat of 2004 was followed by a series of setbacks for the BJP. M Venkaiah Naidu had to resign as party president, and Advani took charge again. In April 2005, RSS chief K S Sudarshan, who had, without taking any names, earlier described Vajpayee's close confidant Brajesh Mishra as "incompetent", asked both Advani and Vajpayee to step

aside for a younger leadership to emerge.

In June 2005, on a visit to Pakistan, Advani praised Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, calling him a "secular" person and visiting his *mazaar*. He resigned as party chief that December, and was replaced by Rajnath Singh. In May 2006, Pramod Mahajan, the BJP's rising star, was shot dead by his own brother.

Vajpayee, 85 years old and ailing, decided not to fight the 2009 election. Advani, 81, became the BJP's prime ministerial candidate.

The election of 2009

In Assembly elections held in 2008, the Congress retained power in Delhi and Rajasthan, but the BJP returned in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and also won in Karnataka. In November, Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists attacked Mumbai. The Lok Sabha election of 2009 was held in five phases between April 16 and May 13.

The elections were held on newly delimited constituencies and their boundaries, which resulted in the composition of voters changing in almost 500 constituencies. Of the 71.69 crore electors, 41.71 crore (58.21%) voted at 8.30 lakh polling stations

June 1: Vote in Punjab, anniversary of 2 events that changed state's politics

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, MAY 29

JUNE 1, THE day Punjab votes in the last phase of the Lok Sabha election, happens to be the anniversary of two pivotal events that have influenced the recent history and politics of the state. Both events have featured in the campaign — either as part of direct reminders to electors, or as echoes or references in speeches delivered by certain candidates.

June 1 will be the 40th anniversary of the beginning of Operation Blue Star, the Indian Army operation to flush out Khalistani militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The assault on the holiest shrine of the Sikhs triggered a chain of bloody events including the assassination of India's Prime Minister, and unprecedented organised violence

against members of the community in Delhi and other places.

Years later, on another June 1, a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib (*saroop*), considered the living Guru of the Sikhs, was stolen from a gurdwara in Faridkot, leading to a series of sacrilegious incidents that have had a profound impact on Punjab politics.

June 1, 1984: Op Blue Star

Despite objections from various quarters including Cabinet Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Indira Gandhi authorised the military action at the Golden Temple in mid-May, 1984. By May 29, troops from the 9th Infantry Division in Meerut had arrived in Amritsar, supported by Para commandos. Their mission was to flush out militant ideologue Jamail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers who had set up base in the temple.

On June 1, an exchange of fire between

militants and CRPF personnel who had taken up positions atop private buildings near the temple resulted in the deaths of 11 civilians. Operation Blue Star lasted until June 10, and took a heavy toll on life, property, and emotions. The Akal Takht, the temporal seat of the Sikhs, was destroyed in the operation.

Army reports listed 554 deaths, including those of four officers and 79 soldiers, but actual casualties were likely much higher, with many pilgrims among the victims. Bhindranwale was killed in the operation.

FALLOUT: Operation Blue Star cast a long shadow on the politics of Punjab and India. On October 31, 1984, Indira was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards, which led to mobs going on the rampage, killing 2,146 people in Delhi alone.

In 1985, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal,

a leader of the Akali Dal, the country's oldest regional party, was assassinated within a month of his signing a peace accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The "dark decade" of violence and instability in Punjab followed.

Operation Blue Star remains a potent factor in Punjab's politics even today. Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal has been showing a picture of the damaged Akal Takht at every election rally in an attempt to whip up anger against the Congress. The AAP and BJP have been reminding voters of the violence unleashed on Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira's assassination.

Many Sikh voters, however, do not hold the current leadership of the Congress responsible. Rahul Gandhi has performed *sewa* at the Golden Temple on several occasions, and the Congress hopes for a good

showing in the election.

June 1, 2015: Holy Book stolen

After a *saroop* of the Guru Granth Sahib disappeared from a gurdwara in Burj Jawahar Singh Wala, Faridkot, widespread protests broke out across Punjab. Extensive searches were carried out, including draining a large water body behind the gurdwara, but the *saroop* was not found.

In October 2015, torn pages from what was believed to be the stolen *saroop* were discovered outside the Bargari gurdwara across the road. This led to a sharp escalation of unrest, and two protesters were killed in police firing at Behbal Kalan. More than 100 incidents of sacrilege have been reported over the last few years, some of which have led to deadly lynchings of the alleged accused.

FALLOUT: The issue of sacrilege has

been extremely sensitive, and has left a significant mark on the politics of the state since 2015. After two successive terms in power, the Akali Dal, which was seen as being lenient towards those responsible for the incidents, suffered a major defeat in the 2017 elections, when it could win only 15 of the 117 seats in the Assembly.

Congress Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh faced dissent and was replaced in 2021 after his party colleague Navjot Singh Sidhu accused him of not doing enough to bring the accused in the 2015 case to justice. Last December, Sukhbir Singh Badal apologised for the incidents of sacrilege during his tenure.

The issue remains sensitive, with ongoing political repercussions. In 2022, the Punjab Assembly passed a Bill that provides for life imprisonment for sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib and other religious texts.



Telangana Today

FOR LOCAL TO GLOBAL NEWS

Lifestyle changes hold the key

Unhealthy lifestyles are wreaking havoc on the lives of India's youth. The latest study has revealed that there is a growing incidence of cancer among young people. This alarming trend must serve as a wake-up call for all the stakeholders in society — from healthcare policymakers to the educators and the vulnerable sections. According to the study, carried out by the Cancer Mukta Bharat Foundation, a non-profit organisation run by a group of public-spirited oncologists, people below the age of 40 account for nearly 20% of the total number of cancer cases reported in the country. And, significantly, nearly 60% of these patients are men. Experts have linked the rising risk of cancer in the younger generation with obesity, a sedentary lifestyle and higher consumption of ultra-processed food, besides tobacco and alcohol. The most prevalent cases are of head and neck cancer (26%), followed by gastrointestinal cancer (16%), breast cancer (15%) and blood cancer (9%). Spreading public awareness about the importance of adopting healthy lifestyles is the first step in the battle against the dreaded disease. Growing obesity, changes in dietary habits, specifically the increase in consumption of ultra-processed foods, and sedentary lifestyles are associated with higher cancer rates. A major worrying factor is the late detection of cancer in two-thirds of the cases, indicating low levels of awareness about screening. The study surveyed over 1,368 cancer patients across India from March 1 to May 15 this year. One of the key revelations from the study is the stage at which cancer is diagnosed.

Alarming, about 63% of cases were detected at stage 3 or 4, indicating late diagnosis, while only 27% were diagnosed at stage 1 or 2. This highlights the urgent need for increased cancer awareness and screening initiatives. The Cancer Mukta Bharat Foundation provides a free helpline for cancer patients with access to leading oncologists for expert guidance and support. India has earned the dubious distinction of being the cancer capital of the world and records more than a million new cases every year. The surge is estimated to surpass the global average by 2025. A focused approach is needed to handle cases of people under 40, who form an important segment of the working-age population. The case burden can be reduced by lifestyle modification and effective screening strategies that detect cancer in the early stages. India needs to be well prepared for this silent epidemic which threatens to derail the economic success story. Affordable and effective cancer care should be prioritised. Cancer research, too, must get the importance it deserves. A multipronged strategy can help India strongly combat the emperor of all maladies. It must be pointed out that some forms of cancer are totally preventable and curable, provided they are detected early. Unfortunately, India has been lackadaisical in implementing an effective screening mechanism.

India has earned the dubious distinction of being the cancer capital of the world with over a million new cases every year

06

VIEWPOINT

HYDERABAD, Thursday, May 30, 2024



PRIYANKA GANDHI VADRA
Congress general secretary

“Modi ji calls Himachal as his second home but he neither gave any special package to the State nor did he declare the worst ever monsoon as a national disaster



NABIL ABU RUDEINEH
Spokesperson for Palestinian presidency

We hold the US administration fully responsible for the situation in Rafah and across Gaza... Israel ignored the ruling of an international court and has turned the city unlivable



MAMATA BANERJEE
West Bengal Chief Minister

Had I not come out of the Congress and formed the Trinamool Congress, then even today we would not have been able to defeat the CPI(M) in West Bengal

Antarctic Treaty is at risk

Shifting geopolitics, climate crisis can impact this final frontier, which will have implications for the world



SHIRLEY SCOTT

It's been hot in Kochi, where representatives from at least 60 nations have gathered for two important meetings on the future of the world's coldest continent, Antarctica. The 46th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting and accompanying 26th Meeting of the Committee for Environmental Protection also attract observers from several non-governmental organisations with an interest in the regulation of Antarctic tourism and the protection of its environment. But unlike the temperatures outside, the atmosphere inside the meeting venue has been frosty following recent reports that Russia has discovered vast amounts of oil and gas in the British Antarctic Territory.

Russia's Activities

Mining activities in Antarctica are banned under the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty, which was adopted in 1991, with Australia playing a lead role. Russia's activities are worrying other countries that fear they will essentially be ripping up the treaty if prospecting goes any further.

The Antarctica Consultative Meetings are regular annual meetings of the states party to the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. The meetings are where states conduct the business of collectively implementing the treaty, which is the cornerstone of the governance system for Antarctica, known as the Antarctic Treaty System. The Antarctic Treaty was considered a diplomatic triumph at the height of the Cold War. Concerned that the continent might become a place of conflict, the original 12 states meeting in Washington DC who signed the treaty agreed to use Antarctica for peaceful purposes only.

The treaty does permit the use of



military personnel or equipment for scientific research or for any other peaceful purposes but prohibits measures of a military nature such as the carrying out of military manoeuvres or weapons testing.

Territorial Rights

Perhaps the most fundamental question addressed by the treaty is that of the geopolitical status of the continent. Seven states had made claims to specific portions of Antarctica — Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom. Some of the claims overlap.

The situation was complicated further by the fact that neither the United States nor the then-USSR had made a formal claim. Australia has territorial rights to the Australian Antarctic Territory, which covers 42 per cent of the Antarctic continent.

Contrary to popular opinion, the fact that few other countries have explicitly recognised Australia's title does not detract from its legal validity. The treaty includes an agreement to disagree on the question of territorial sovereignty. Australia is not required to renounce its sovereignty but neither are other states required to respect its territorial title during the life of the treaty.

Australia's Interest

The Antarctic Treaty is, therefore, of particular importance to Australia because it protects Australia's legal rights in respect of the Australian Antarctic Territory. Australia is an active and strong participant within the treaty system. The treaty has been widely hailed as an example of successful in-

ternational cooperation.

It is easy to assume that harmony in respect of Antarctica was — and will continue to be — guaranteed by its remoteness, and to underestimate the significant achievement of the treaty system. But shifting geopolitics and a changing climate could both impact this final frontier, which would have implications for the whole world.

The 2023 meeting adopted a Declaration on Climate Change and also agreed to new wording for the website of the treaty system — both of which can be understood in part as responding to the common misapprehension that the prohibition on mineral resource activities, other than scientific research, will come to an end in 2048. The prohibition has no end date. Any party can request its review from 2048 onwards, but overturning the ban would involve a relatively complex process that is by no means guaranteed to succeed.

Political tensions are felt at the meetings, although more with respect to those issues with higher stakes. Both Russia and Ukraine are parties to the treaty and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has caused some antagonism. Russia prepared a paper for the 2023 meeting, which addressed what it referred to as the "politicisation" of the gathering.

Seven states made claims to specific portions of Antarctica — Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, and UK. Some claims overlap

There are concerns that even before we reach 2048, grey zone activities — nefarious or coercive activities that stop short of overtly breaching established rules and norms — may weaken the force of those norms or even lead to a complete breakdown of the treaty system. One of the most obvious rules in relation to which there could be grey zone activities is that of prospecting versus scientific research. The alarm greeting Russia's reported oil and gas activities can be understood in this light.

China's Ambitions
There are also concerns regarding China's Antarctic ambitions, both with respect to dual-use technology and also in terms of China's aim for far greater access to the resources of Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. Earlier this year, China opened its fifth Antarctic facility, the Qiling Station, on Inexpressible Island in the Ross Sea. Due to our proximity to Antarctica, climatic changes there, like the melting of Antarctic ice sheets and resulting rising sea levels, could have a profound impact on geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific. A strong Australian voice when it comes to matters of Antarctic governance remains critical for ensuring a peaceful and sustainable future for Antarctica.

(The author is a Professor of International Law and International Relations in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW Canberra. 360info)

Letters to the Editor

RBI dividend

Global rating agencies have indicated that the usage of the Rs 2.1 lakh crore dividend from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will be a key indicator of the new government's fiscal priorities in India. This dividend is a significant increase from the Rs 1.02 lakh crore that was initially budgeted by the government. The agencies suggest that how the new government decides to use this windfall — whether to save it or spend it — will signal their approach to fiscal management. For instance, Fitch Ratings mentioned that sustained deficit reduction, sup-

ported by durable revenue-raising reforms, would positively affect India's rating over the medium term. Moreover, the decision on the dividend's usage could impact the fiscal deficit target of 5.1%, either helping meet it or potentially allowing for a lower deficit than the current target. With the general elections underway, the new government is expected to present a full budget for the fiscal year 2024-25 in July. The larger-than-expected RBI dividend is seen as a positive for India's fiscal metrics, but its one-off nature means that its medium-term impact on India's debt consolidation and debt path will be limited. The incoming government's decision on the dividend will thus be closely.

AMARJEET KUMAR,
Hazratnagar

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

■ The New Zealand Herald

Study finds elder abuse rampant

New research finds elder abuse to be rampant among Asian communities, with about half of older Indians and a third from the Chinese community aged 65 and over claiming they are victims.

■ The Guardian

I am chosen by God, claims Modi

"I am convinced that 'Parmatma' (God) sent me for a purpose. Once the purpose is achieved, my work will be one done. This is why I have completely dedicated myself to God," he told NDTV news channel on Sunday.

■ The Kathmandu Post

Startup calls off rocket launch

India's Agnikul Cosmos called off a test flight of its first rocket on Tuesday seconds before it was due to launch — the fourth such cancellation in three months. It had been aborted three times earlier because of technical issues.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Dera chief's acquittal

CBI must explain why 'open & shut' case fell flat

THE acquittal of Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and four others in the Ranjit Singh murder case is a major embarrassment to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Pronouncing its verdict, the Punjab and Haryana High Court observed that the investigating officers carried out a 'tainted and sketchy' probe and collected evidence that was unworthy of credence. Ram Rahim and the others had been convicted in this case by a special CBI court in Panchkula in October 2021, four years after he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for raping two of his disciples.

Ranjit Singh, a former manager and follower of the Sirsa-headquartered sect, was shot dead at Khanpur Kolian village in Kurukshetra in July 2002. The apparent reason behind the killing was his suspected role in the circulation of an anonymous letter, which purportedly said that women were being sexually exploited by Ram Rahim on the dera premises. Sirsa-based journalist Ram Chander Chhatrapati had published the letter in his Hindi-language newspaper, *Poora Sach* (The Whole Truth). He was killed by gunmen months later in 2002. Ram Rahim was convicted for the murder and sentenced to life imprisonment by a special CBI court in January 2019.

Against this backdrop, it is lamentable that the CBI's probe into the Ranjit Singh case failed to withstand the high court's scrutiny. The HC has pointed out multiple lapses: the car allegedly used in the crime was never found; even though three prosecution witnesses stated that all four assailants were armed, no weapon was recovered by CBI sleuths. The court has also flagged the pitfalls of conducting an investigation influenced by the 'glare of media publicity'. Now it's back to the drawing board for the premier probe agency, whose credibility has come under a cloud. The CBI needs to explain why a seemingly open-and-shut case fell flat and also hold erring officers accountable.

Sharif's admission

A chance to reset Indo-Pak relations?

FORMER Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's candid admission that his country violated the 1999 Lahore Declaration marks a significant moment in the history of India-Pakistan relations. Twenty-five years on, Sharif's apparent reference to the Kargil War has turned the spotlight on the controversial saga. Speaking at a meeting of the PML-N general council after being sworn in as its president on Tuesday, he acknowledged Pakistan's role in undermining the peace initiative that he and then Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee had championed. The Lahore Declaration, signed on February 21, 1999, helped foster a vision of peace and stability. However, this hope proved short-lived. The Kargil War, initiated by Pakistani incursion into Indian territory a few months later, shattered the nascent trust.

Sharif's return to political prominence and his willingness to own up to past mistakes offer a glimmer of hope. He is prodding Pakistan to reassess its approach to India, raising a significant question: Can Sharif's leadership turn introspection into a renewed effort for peace?

Sharif's confession is significant in the broader geopolitical context, given the current state of India-Pakistan relations. Since the 2019 Pulwama attack, diplomatic ties have been severely strained, with both nations downgrading their missions. For a region beset with volatility, Sharif's remarks open a window for reflection and reconciliation. This development should spur the two neighbours to rise above historical animosities and revisit their diplomatic strategies. It is imperative that they build on this opportunity, however tenuous, to explore avenues for dialogue. It is a chance to redefine their relationship not by the missteps of the past, but by the possibility of peaceful coexistence in future.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, MAY 30, 1924

Government and Lee Commission's report

IF the Government of India had either logic or the gift of humour among its many accomplishments, it is difficult to see how it could talk grandiloquently of the necessity of immediately "considering the Lee Commission's report". It has been stated again and again, and the statement has never yet been refuted, that the Commission was not appointed by the government but was virtually appointed over its head. But whether this was so or not, it is at least undeniable that things have happened since the appointment of this Commission which have made any report it could possibly submit, and certainly the report it has actually submitted, literally obsolete. The country, through the mouth of its accredited representatives in the Legislature, has asked for an inquiry into the whole question of the Reforms through a Round Table Conference with a view to the early establishment of responsible government. The Government of India, while rejecting the idea of an immediate overhauling of the reformed Constitution, has appointed a Committee to inquire into the working of the Reforms, while the Secretary of State has declared that after this inquiry has been held, "we will go on". In the face of these facts, to insist on the necessity of giving effect to the inadequate, halting and unsatisfactory recommendations of the Lee Commission is to betray at once a lack of the logical understanding and a complete want of all sense of humour. What is the value of the Secretary of State's assurance and the Government of India's own action if for the next 15 years, the question of Indianisation is to be regarded as closed?

India needs action plan to beat the heat

We must have a comprehensive policy response as advisories are not enough



DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

SEVERE heatwave conditions are prevailing in northwest and central India, the western Himalayan region and Maharashtra. The mercury crossed 50°C in Haryana's Sirsa and Rajasthan's Churu on Tuesday. Most parts of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi-NCR are experiencing day-time temperatures above 45°C.

Hospitals are reporting a rise in heat-related illnesses in many states, with some regions also reporting deaths due to heatstroke. Film star Shah Rukh Khan was admitted to an Ahmedabad hospital after he fell ill due to the heat, making it a subject of social media chatter. Besides obvious health impacts, extreme heat is also beginning to hit workforce productivity in many sectors, thus adversely affecting the economy. Therefore, merely issuing advisories asking people to remain indoors and remain hydrated is not enough. We need a comprehensive policy response to heat — which is lacking at present.

To its credit, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has been doing a good job with its heat-related forecasts and warnings. On March 1, it released its outlook for seasonal temperatures from March to May, forecasting above-normal temperatures in most parts of the country. The outlook was updated on April 1, giving greater details of the regions likely to experience above-normal temperatures up to June. It warned that "prolonged periods of extreme heat can lead to dehydration and strain infrastructure such as power grids and transportation systems. To address



SCORCHER: Heat islands develop in cities due to factors such as a lack of vegetation and water bodies. REUTERS

these challenges, it is imperative for the authorities to take proactive measures." Another agency, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) — which runs the National Programme for Climate Change and Human Health — did its part. It issued an advisory for state health departments on the heatwave.

The NCDC advisory had a section called 'Heat-related illnesses (HRI)' — focused mass gathering/sporting event preparedness.' The current summer season has coincided with two major country-wide events — the Indian Premier League (IPL), which started on March 22 and ended on May 26; and the polling for the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections (April 19 to June 1). The voter turnout in regions experiencing extreme heat was lower than expected. In some instances, candidates on the campaign trail fainted due to the extreme heat. While most of the IPL matches were held in the evening, fans usually started gathering in stadia in the afternoon, when the day temperature peaked, and players had their practice sessions during the day. Like the advisories for mass

Looking at extreme heat as something that only the IMD or the health sector needs to handle is not going to help.

gathering events, cities are also supposed to develop and implement heat action plans. Such plans should focus on building awareness of the health risks of heatwaves and heat-related deaths and illnesses, and getting the health system ready to handle heat-related illnesses. All government agencies concerned should coordinate their actions to alert people about predicted extreme temperatures and take measures to reduce heat exposure and promote adaptive measures. Shaded areas and shelters should be developed and the working hours of people engaged in physical labour in the open should be adjusted to avoid exposure to extreme temperatures.

As with the guidelines on mass gatherings, the directive from the central government exists on heat action plans but not many cities and states have developed such plans. This is despite evidence that the action plan implemented in Ahmedabad since 2013 has resulted in a reduction in mortality associated with extreme heat. Telangana and Odisha have also developed heat action plans, but the impact of such plans depends on how effectively they are implemented.

It has also emerged that warming in cities depends on local factors such as the density of population, concentration of concrete structure, tree cover, etc. For several years, scientists have been talking of the 'urban heat island' effect to explain greater warming in a particular region of a city than its surroundings. Such heat islands develop in cities due to many factors — the lack of vegetation and water bodies, local industrial activity, dense infrastructure that traps heat and restricts airflow, and release of hot air from large air conditioning systems. In Delhi, for instance, the night temperature in Sitaram Bazar, Connaught Place and Bhikaji Cama

Place is several notches higher than surrounding areas, turning them into heat islands.

A recent study by researchers from IIT Bhubaneswar, based on data from 141 Indian cities, has reported that the warming experienced in the city is almost double that experienced across the entire Indian landmass. Cities in the northwestern, northeastern and southern regions have seen a more pronounced increase in the night-time land surface temperature than cities in other parts of the country. Studies at IIT Gandhinagar had warned that the urban heat island effect, driven by rapid urbanisation, could worsen extreme heat conditions in Indian cities.

There is enough evidence for government agencies to initiate action to combat the effects of heat. Given that night-time heating is more significant during heatwaves, measures like passive cooling (through ventilation, shading, insulation and reflective surfaces) should be used to bring down indoor temperatures. Building codes should promote materials that absorb less heat and are sustainable so that the amount of heating caused by stored heat can be reduced. The presence of water bodies and vegetation is also helpful in reducing additional night-time heating. Heat action plans suggest 'cool roofs' for low-income houses to reduce indoor temperatures.

We need public policies that promote coordinated action to design and implement such heat adaptation methods. These policies have to be developed across sectors — health, urban planning, environment, transport, education, labour, infrastructure, construction, finance and so on. For implementation, technical and financial support should be provided to municipal corporations and local bodies. The involvement of the scientific community, local communities and civil society is also critical. Looking at extreme heat as something that only the IMD or the health sector needs to handle is not going to help.

“ We are living through climate collapse in real time. — António Guterres ”

The grand dance of democracy

CV SUKUMARAN

ELECTIONS are called the 'dance of democracy'. Or is it the dance of politicians? Unlike professional dancers who usually have harmonious relations with each other, political 'dancers' don't see eye to eye with their rivals. It is a dog-eat-dog world out there.

My first encounter with the 'dance of democracy' took place decades ago when I had not even attained the voting age. I was then in my early teens. It was the day of our village panchayat elections. A few classrooms in my school had been converted into polling booths. It was a special occasion for the institution as well as its staff and students.

The son of a local official, who happened to be my grandfather's cousin, was among the candidates. He was elected as a panchayat member and later became the head. I saw him coming out of the school gate, overwhelmed by his admirers' tumultuous welcome. He was profusely garlanded by well-wishers and taken out in a procession around the village.

Though the voting day was a holiday, I, along with my schoolmates, set off for the campus early in the morning, much before the start of polling, despite the elders' disapproval. We were overly enthusiastic about going to school that day, unlike other days, when we attended classes virtually under duress.

However, the police didn't allow us to be anywhere near the school. Lathi-wielding cops made sure of that. Besides, they had put up barricades to disallow the entry of non-voters. One of the boys picked up a stone and hurled it at a middle-aged policeman in a fit of anger before running away. But he missed his aim. The cop, who was absolutely seething, chased him. However, the boy was too quick for him. When the cop's rage consumed itself, he gave up the chase and resumed his duty.

A few days ago, as I walked to the nearby school — where my children had studied — to cast my vote, it dawned on me that I had come a long way from the panchayat elections held in my own school to the current Lok Sabha elections. Our democracy, too, has come a long way. Bertrand Russell wrote in an article, 'On Politicians': 'In most democratic countries, to call a man a politician is to say something derisive about him.' Will our politicians be able to give the lie to Russell?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

No room for complacency

Apropos of the editorial 'Bomb threats'; a series of bomb threats has rocked India in recent weeks, prompting heightened security measures and emphasising the need for constant vigilance. While the threats turned out to be a case of false alarm, it is imperative that the authorities concerned do not let their guard down. India cannot afford to be complacent, given the evolving security landscape. The hoaxes have thrown the spotlight on the persistent threat of terrorist attacks in the country. Each threat, whether real or not, demands a swift and comprehensive response to safeguard lives and maintain law and order. The advances in technology have made it easier for anti-social elements to send out threats while staying anonymous, necessitating proactive countermeasures like increased surveillance and public awareness campaigns. Collaboration between government agencies, law enforcement bodies and the public is essential for an effective response.

DEVANJANA, BY MAIL

Tackle international cybercrimes

Refer to 'Bomb threats'; the fact that probe agencies have traced the IP address of the threatening emails sent to schools to Hungary is a matter of concern. It is alarming how miscreants and terrorists are misusing technology to cause widespread disruptions in India. Notably, anti-social elements have become increasingly reliant on the Internet to commit a wide range of crimes. The government must come up with effective measures to counter the frequent misuse of technology by criminals. Elaborate cybercrimes often leave the cops groping in the dark. Besides, since probe agencies lack jurisdiction on foreign soil, it is difficult for them to nail those behind such offences. The need of the hour is to develop an international framework to nab cybercriminals.

NISHANT PRASHAR, NURPUR

Lapses that cost lives

The death of several newborn children in a massive fire at a private neonatal hospital in Delhi is shocking. The hospital was operating with an expired licence and had no fire-

fighting arrangements in place. The facility did not even have the necessary clearance from the fire department. Besides, the medical personnel on duty were not qualified to provide care to newborns. Moreover, the hospital had been refilling oxygen from a bigger cylinder into a smaller one, even though it is illegal for a medical facility to have a refilling system since it could cause a fire. All these are huge criminal lapses that call for strict punishment.

UPENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Scourge of unexplained extensions

With reference to the article 'Army Chief's one-month extension sends out wrong signal'; the practice of granting such extensions, not just in the defence forces but in every field, needs to end. It has become common for the government to extend the tenure of position-holders or office-bearers for reasons that are never clearly spelt out. The back-to-back extensions granted to then Enforcement Directorate chief SK Mishra had kicked up a row. Such decisions have raised many eyebrows and prompted people to become suspicious. Such unexplained extensions send out the message that the next person in line is not competent enough to take over the reins. Not only do such moves dent the image of the institution, but they also hold off promotions.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Recognition for Palestine

The decision of three European countries — Norway, Ireland and Spain — to recognise the state of Palestine is welcome. It will help the Palestine cause at this difficult juncture and mount pressure on an adamant Israel — which has shown utter disregard for international laws amid the humanitarian crisis caused by its war against Hamas — to agree to a ceasefire. The years-long efforts of Palestine to gain UN membership have not yet yielded the desired result, thanks to staunch opposition from the US. But the growing support for Palestine from all over the world will surely help amplify the voice of the war-torn country.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM (AP)

No room for Delhi's statehood in a nation-state



ABHIJIT BHATTACHARYYA
SUPREME COURT ADVOCATE

DELHI, the capital of the world's most populous country, should not be made a state within the nation-state mandated by the Constitution. This is for the sake of India's unity, integrity, safety, security, sovereignty and fraternity with its diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. Territorially, India has never been so big except during the reign of Emperor Ashoka and Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

Amid the parliamentary elections, the sudden revival of the promise by politicians that "we will get full statehood for Delhi" is disturbing, to say the least. This is because there is already no dearth of allegations and counter-allegations hurled by political leaders across the country with the sole aim of wooing voters. The statehood demand is obviously aimed at enhancing their electoral prospects. This issue was also raised during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections to attract Delhi residents, who usually

don't have the time or the inclination to assess the adverse implications of such emotive 'non-issues'. It was in 2018 that the Supreme Court had dismissed a plea seeking full statehood for Delhi, saying that it had become infructuous in view of the Constitution Bench verdict which had held that Delhi could not be accorded the status of a state.

The present cacophony appears to echo the words of English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who described life as a "war of all against all". Should the sovereign state of India be pushed into anarchy over Delhi's full statehood?

In fact, no political party or ideologically motivated organisation (left, right or centre) should try to play with fire in the capital (or for that matter any province) of a country which is geographically among the largest in the world. The Constitution needs to be studied closely and its essence grasped, imbibed and implemented in letter and spirit, not in violation thereof.

Article 1(1) of the Constitution stipulates that "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States", while Article 239AA (inserted through the 69th Amendment Act, 1991) lays down that the "Union territory of Delhi shall be called the National Capital Territory of Delhi", and the "administrator thereof shall be designated as the Lieutenant Governor". Article 239AA(2a) says: "There shall be a Legislative Assembly for the National Capital Territory". Nevertheless, the point is unambiguous: Delhi is the capital of India. It is a union territory (like other UTs) and not a state, though it has a Legislative Assembly.

Getting down to brass tacks, let's foresee the dangers inherent in raising the demand for Delhi's statehood. First and foremost,



VESTED INTERESTS: No political party should try to play with fire in the national capital. iStock

the capital city belongs to India and every citizen thereof. If it's made a full-fledged state, can the next slogan of the "sons of the soil" be far behind? Thereafter, can anyone stop "reservation and quotas" and "Delhi for Delhiwals" movement? Will 'outsiders' then be deported or deprived of their property and jobs? Will entry be restricted and some sort of permit be required for visiting Delhi? Who will gain from such bizarre curbs? Where will Central Government officers and offices go? How will the two Delhis

The Delhi statehood demand is part of a sinister agenda which keeps cropping up during the elections to whip up parochial sentiments.

the capital city belongs to India and every citizen thereof. If it's made a full-fledged state, can the next slogan of the "sons of the soil" be far behind? Thereafter, can anyone stop "reservation and quotas" and "Delhi for Delhiwals" movement? Will 'outsiders' then be deported or deprived of their property and jobs? Will entry be restricted and some sort of permit be required for visiting Delhi? Who will gain from such bizarre curbs? Where will Central Government officers and offices go? How will the two Delhis

— the capital of India and the state within the nation-state — be differentiated? How will the police forces organise their roster of duties amid overlapping territorial jurisdiction? What will happen to the 200-plus foreign diplomatic missions operating from Delhi? Won't they end up in troubled waters created by the myopic polity? How will the majority of Indians living outside of Delhi accept the tumultuous transformation? Will India become a unique test case of the 21st century, a "country without a capital" or a partitioned capital of a partitioned nation-state, propped up by the political elites of the biggest democracy in the world?

The US Constitution grants the Congress the authority to admit new states into the Union. Thus, from 13 states in 1776, America today has expanded to 50 states jointly called the United States of America. Article 1(3)(c) of the Indian Constitution has ordained that "India shall comprise" of "such other territories as may be acquired". Thus, the number of states in India expanded with the acquisition of Goa (1961) and Sikkim (1975). It must nevertheless be remembered that unlike the US, where land expansion increased the states' count, it was caused in India by division, contrac-

tion and cutting up of states and UTs owing to a contradictory and divisive agenda and an inherent political inability to follow unity of purpose. In 1956, the country had 14 states and six UTs; today, there are 28 states and eight UTs.

The Delhi statehood demand is part of a sinister agenda which keeps cropping up during the elections to whip up parochial sentiments, leading to potential conflict and breach of peace and harmony.

It's, therefore, time to take the bull by the horns. If the state of Jammu and Kashmir can be bifurcated into two UTs, Delhi's legislature and the office of the Lieutenant Governor can also be abolished. India may revert to the two-tier system for Delhi: one headed by the Chief Commissioner reporting to the President's office through the Cabinet Secretary, and the other by the Mayor — elected every five years — who would be responsible for the maintenance and development of the Capital.

'Land' could come under the Urban Development Ministry, and the Police Commissioner report to the Chief Commissioner-Cabinet Secretary-President. The clamour for turning the UT into a state could lead to a more serious demand for a 'break-up' across India.

Geopolitical churn fails to impede India's trade surge



SUBIR ROY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

A new Cold War began two years ago between Western powers and Russia when the latter invaded Ukraine, with China being a key player as well. Though India has been caught up in the conflict, it has managed to keep making economic gains despite being unable to distance itself from the global tensions.

Even though there has been a prolonged standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh, the two countries continue doing a good bit of trading. Imports from China to India crossed over \$100 billion in FY24. It goes without saying that the merchandise that India procured from China made sound economic sense. Electronics, chemicals, machinery and plastics have spurred considerable economic growth.

But since most Indians hold a very negative view of China, the two countries remain as far away from

each other as possible. Since the US, France, Japan and Australia also have a bad perception of China, India has, along with the others, sought to discourage Chinese apps, investments and startups. India has also frowned upon the Dragon's Belt and Road Initiative, even as it has reached an agreement with Iran for developing the Chabahar port.

One of the most important decisions India has taken is to agree with the Western powers to join the 'China Plus One' bandwagon. Leading global companies that have elaborate manufacturing factories in China are being asked to take those units out of the country and into India and Southeast Asia. A global company, Apple, has decided to set up a manufacturing base in India to make iPhone 14, and Foxconn is manufacturing on its behalf.

However, a degree of caution is called for. Even as New Delhi is seeking to continue doing business with Beijing and bringing in huge imports, mostly through intermediaries, it is also attempting to create big manufacturing ventures that are largely self-reliant and able to export across the world. There is now an attempt to make a success of production-



PRIORITIES: Even though there has been a prolonged standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh, the two countries continue doing a good bit of trading. iStock

linked incentive (PLI) schemes that allow subsidies to go in for large production so that, at the end of the day, major production units become globally competitive.

This is part of the need for India to become self-reliant or *atmanirbhar*. But PLI units have not made much progress over the years. So, the feeling is that such units will not become robust globally. Hence, there is a need to identify industries to boost, not who their pro-

A different kind of Cold War is on. India freely does business with Russia and China, despite being clearly aligned with Western powers.

ducers should be. Manufacturing units, small or large, should be allowed to survive — and if they are not good enough, perish. Manufacturing, thus, will do its own thing instead of trying to find large winners.

Now, we need to take up a key point — the conflicting nature of the actions of the US and India over business with Russia. The US has used sanctions to make it difficult for Russia to trade with much of the rest of the world. But even as India is

aligned with Western diplomatic aims, it continues to heavily import oil from Russia, managing different ways to pay for the oil without using dollars from the main financial centres. Not just India, north European nations also continue to import gas from Russia, notwithstanding the strict sanctions that seek to rein in Russian exports.

India defies the US by continuing to trade with countries like China and Russia. The bilateral trade between India and the US was estimated to be \$118.28 billion in 2023-24. Additionally, Washington was the top trading partner of New Delhi during 2021-22 and 2022-23. Indian IT companies have played a key role in earning dollars from the West. But the US authorities are trying to hike H-1B visa rates so that there are fewer immigrants from India and the locals have more jobs. But Indian IT companies are still sending engineers to the US, despite having to bear the sky-high visa expenses. So, though New Delhi and Washington keep quarrelling, they continue to profit off each other.

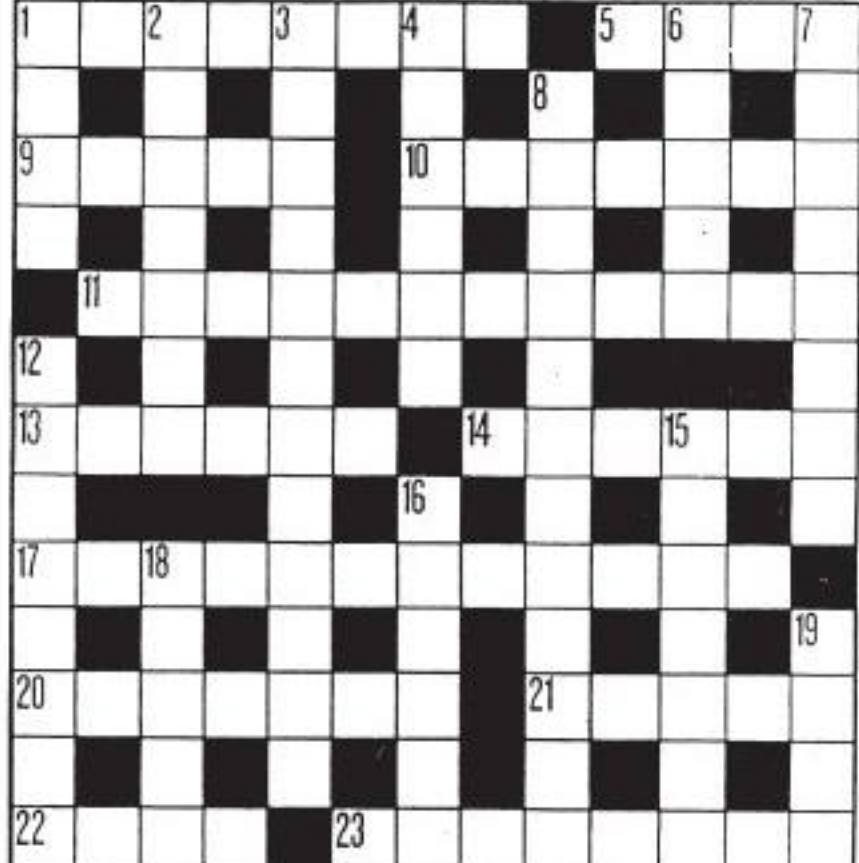
As a Cold War of sorts is sweeping the world, it is impossible not to recall how the original Cold War played out when communist countries and free

nations barely spoke to each other and stopped just short of going to war (not counting some proxy wars). The Cold War lasted over four decades, ending when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. All said and done, that Cold War was marked by a little more integrity. In today's Cold War, economic interests are easily allowed to prevail.

In the post-1945 Cold War, India swore by non-alignment and depended on the Soviet Union to get steel and fertiliser factories. Then PM Jawaharlal Nehru befriended Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who was an open enemy of the US. Indira Gandhi, too, went along with Castro, but eventually had to beg then US President Lyndon Johnson for wheat to stave off a famine.

Today, a different kind of Cold War is on. India freely does business with Russia and China, despite being clearly aligned with Western powers. There is no integrity in politics or geopolitics. And India makes money wherever it can. Just recently, the US read India the riot act over the latter's engagement with Iran with regard to the Chabahar port. But Washington stopped short of slapping sanctions on New Delhi. This reflects India's growing economic heft.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Adventurous prank (8)
5 Wild doglike animal (4)
9 Serious immediate danger (5)
10 Take cover (7)
11 Brilliant well-timed act (12)
13 Expression of praise (6)
14 Spring back (6)
17 Dismantle (4,2,6)
20 Personal vanity (7)
21 Unattached (5)
22 Positive clue (4)
23 Artificially induced sleep (8)

DOWN

1 Catch sight of (4)
2 Panacea (4-3)
3 Cooperate (4,8)
4 Wilderness (6)
6 Surpass (5)
7 Hitherto (8)
8 Put finishing touch to (3,3,4,2)
12 Perpendicular (8)
15 Oppressive (7)
16 Indifference (6)
18 East African country (5)
19 Smaller amount (4)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Cast about, 8 Horde, 9 Warrior, 10 Toss-up, 11 Strain, 12 Interest, 15 Toboggan, 18 Energy, 20 Outcry, 21 Topical, 22 Chile, 23 Trenchant.

Down: 2 Adapt, 3 Threat, 4 Browning, 5 Throne, 6 Prosper, 7 Keep at bay, 11 Soft touch, 13 Tone down, 14 Abstain, 16 Garret, 17 Zenith, 19 Grain.

SU DO KU

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

HARD

FORECAST

SUNSET: 19:18 HRS	SUNRISE: 05:22 HRS	THURSDAY	19:18 HRS
		FRIDAY	05:22 HRS
		CITY	MAX MIN
		Chandigarh	45 28
		New Delhi	45 30
		Amritsar	47 26
		Bathinda	49 27
		Jalandhar	45 27
		Ludhiana	47 25
		Bhiwani	48 29
		Hisar	48 28
		Sirsa	49 31
		Dharamsala	37 20
		Manali	29 14
		Shimla	31 21
		Srinagar	31 16
		Jammu	44 25
		Kargil	27 06
		Leh	22 06
		Dehradun	39 26
		Mussoorie	29 22

TEMPERATURE IN °C

FIRST COLUMN

MICROMANAGEMENT AND UNDERMANAGEMENT

It is crucial to balance these extremes by ensuring employee empowerment



In the realm of leadership and management, micromanagement and under management represent two extreme ends of a spectrum posing significant challenges to organisational success. While micromanagement leads to decreased autonomy, innovation and job satisfaction, under management results in a lack of direction, motivation and accountability. By understanding the impacts of these management styles and implementing strategies that balance oversight with empowerment, organisations can foster a productive, innovative and satisfying work environment. Micromanagement involves excessive control and oversight while under management is characterised by a lack of adequate supervision and support. In the spectrum of management styles, micromanagement and under management represent two extremes, each with distinct characteristics and consequences for the workplace. In an organisation, if one is micromanaging the team and not giving its employees the freedom to work, will eventually drive away great talent while settling for mediocrity resulting in fostering anxiety and ultimately leading to negative impacts on overall organisational productivity and job satisfaction. Along with this, decreased employee morale, reduced creativity and innovation, lower productivity, increased stress and burnout, high turnover, poor performance and accountability are some of the impacts of both micromanagement and undermanagement that can be detrimental even though they manifest differently. Various research studies have shown that micromanagement stifles creativity and innovation.



It is negatively correlated with job satisfaction and positively correlated with stress and burnout. Employees under micromanagement reported lower engagement and higher intentions to leave their jobs. While on the other hand, the effects of under management found that employees lacking adequate supervision and feedback exhibited lower job satisfaction and performance. It becomes of utmost importance to strike a balance between the two by adopting management practices that provide appropriate oversight while empowering employees. Balancing between micromanagement and under management involves adopting a management style that provides appropriate oversight while empowering employees. By fostering a culture of trust and empowerment; setting clear goals and expectations; and promoting a results-oriented culture can help the organisation create a positive and productive workplace where both managers and employees thrive. There is no denying the fact that balancing micromanagement and undermanagement is crucial for creating a productive, positive and effective workplace. By finding the middle ground, managers can provide the necessary support and oversight while empowering employees to take initiative and innovate. Remember, be it micromanagement or undermanagement, both can have far-reaching negative effects on both the employees as well as the organisation. By understanding the causes and impacts and then implementing strategies to promote trust, autonomy and effective communication, organisations can create a more positive and productive work environment. Moving away from micromanagement not only enhances employee satisfaction and performance but also contributes to the long-term success and health of the organisation. Micromanagement and undermanagement, as opposite ends of the management spectrum, both present significant challenges to organisational effectiveness and employee well-being. While micromanagement stifles autonomy and innovation through excessive control, under management leaves employees directionless and unsupported. Both styles can lead to significant issues within an organisation, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to effective leadership.

(The writer is an educator; views are personal)

Relevant skill sets can combat unemployment

The rapid digital shift necessitates comprehensive strategies to address skill gaps and ensure inclusive growth. Public-private partnerships are essential



The service sector has undeniably been the primary driver of India's growth since 2000. The exceptional performance of certain modern services has unequivocally contributed to the creation of more productive and decent employment. The reliance on services for economic growth unequivocally demands a fully developed job market, enabling a free flow of the workforce. The absence of such mechanisms will undoubtedly lead to rigidity in the services sector, curtailing growth against the backdrop of the increasingly important position of the services sector. The key focus areas include the pivotal role of technology in shaping the services sector and stimulating job growth in other sectors through multiplier effects.

The momentous transformation of the Indian economy is irrefutably being spearheaded by the service sector, which unequivocally contributes more than 50 per cent of the GDP. The sector's expansion is not happening in isolation but is deeply intertwined with global technological advancements. Technological progress has undeniably been a catalyst for efficiency, customer satisfaction, market expansion and data-driven decision-making within firms. It has also undeniably given rise to new service categories, such as e-commerce and other tech-based services like Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), revolutionising the sector. The relationship between the service sector's growth and technological innovation is undeniably mutually beneficial. As the service sector expands, it undeniably fuels further innovation in technology-based solutions. New ventures and their technological needs undeniably push for continuous technological advancements to gain the competitiveness needed to maintain their foothold in the dynamic industry. This competition and need for differentiation undeniably lead to increased investments in research and development (R&D) and open innovations, benefiting both the firms involved and the public. The introduction of 5G and the ongoing development of 6G technologies have significantly enhanced connectivity, service



THE SERVICE SECTOR UNEQUIVOCALLY OFFERS BOTH ABUNDANT OPPORTUNITIES AND FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES. ADDRESSING CHALLENGES DEMANDS A RESOLUTE, COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH WITH ASTUTE POLICIES AND UNWAVERING IMPLEMENTATION

delivery speed and overall efficiency in India. Efforts to improve digital literacy have further accelerated technology adoption, with 70 per cent of businesses identifying as "Digital Businesses" and the country exhibiting the highest fintech adoption rate at 87 per cent. The application of AI in business operations has markedly improved operational efficiency, customer satisfaction and decision-making, positioning India as a global leader in AI adoption. However, the rapid digital transformation necessitates a balance between creating employment and providing the relevant skill sets for technology-demanding jobs for a new generation is a national need. The service sector unequivocally offers both abundant opportunities and formidable challenges. Addressing challenges demands a resolute, comprehensive approach with astute policies and unwavering implementation. Public-private partnerships and policies aimed at bridging the skill gaps must be executed with unwavering effectiveness. Educational institutions must urgently revamp their curriculum to directly align with the market's skill demands. Technological advancement, while propelling economic growth, undeniably necessitates relentless skill development. To fully exploit technological progress, educational institutions must steadfastly ensure their curriculum is consistently updated and in sync with the latest innovations. **Skill Gap:** In India, the skill gap in the labour force is a significant challenge, with only 51 per cent of the youth deemed employable due to a lack of necessary skills. This issue is exacerbated by the country's diverse socio-economic conditions, particularly affecting those in rural areas and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who lack

access to quality education and training. This situation perpetuates cycles of poverty and aggravates wage inequality. Moreover, inadequate emphasis on developing non-technical skills such as communication, critical thinking and leadership, which are increasingly in demand, further compounds the problem. The absence of these skills from the curriculum of most educational institutes compels employers to choose candidates only from a handful of premier institutes. Additionally, there is a significant mismatch between the skills taught and those required by employers, leading to unemployment even among the formally educated. Efforts to bridge this gap must include public-private partnerships (PPPs), such as the initiative to upgrade Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) and the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) to train 150 million people by 2024. These initiatives are crucial steps toward aligning educational outcomes with market needs, emphasising the vital importance of both technical and non-technical skills development to enhance employability. **Gender Inequality:** Female employability in India has consistently exceeded male employability from 2020 to 2023, but there was a drop in 2024. Furthermore, it has been higher for seven out of eleven years of the Wheebiz India Skills Reports. However, there has been a persistent gap between female and male labour force participation, indicating a clear bias against employing women over men. This bias is diminishing as female labour force participation has risen over the years, but substantial improvement is still necessary. The Indian Government has implemented various initiatives to foster gender-inclusive employment, aim-

ing to bridge the gender gap in the workplace, making employing female labourers more lucrative while also ensuring it does not come at the cost of pay disparity. One significant legislation is the Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, designed to eliminate the wage gap between genders by ensuring equal pay for equal work. However, the act faces challenges, such as the narrow interpretation of the same work or work of a similar nature and the onus on employees to prove discrimination, which is difficult due to workplace power dynamics and legal complexities. Additionally, the Government has launched schemes like Mission Shakti and the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojna-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM), focusing on women's skill development and employability. These initiatives include exclusive training institutes for women, industry-oriented courses and partnerships with private sector bodies and NGOs. To encourage female participation in skill development, 30 per cent of seats in ITIs and ITCs are reserved for women. These measures represent a comprehensive and assertive approach to promoting gender equality in employment, highlighting the crucial importance of legislative support, skill development and financial empowerment in achieving a more inclusive workforce. These unwavering steps will guarantee the complete realisation of the Indian economy's potential and the equitable distribution of the benefits of skills development. (The writer is Co-Founder and MD, of Orane International, a Training Partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), Network Member, of India International Skill Centres, an initiative of GoI. Views expressed are personal)

The dawn of AI: Balancing innovation and prudence

As AI advances, it is essential to strike a balance between harnessing its advantages and addressing its challenges to ensure a sustainable future

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the ex-novo computer technology that essentially deals with developing machines capable of imitating human behaviour. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines AI as the "ability of a computer or robot to perform tasks commonly associated with intelligent beings such as perception, critical thinking and decision-making". As far as the human mind is concerned, first, it processes the information, analyses the processed information from various angles and finally arrives at a logical conclusion. On the contrary, AI is a software programme that solely relies on pre-fed computer data to answer a query. In the entire process, the computer system behaves like



a human mind. AI is the order of the day and admittedly, holds the potential to bring about revolutionary changes in communications, defence, healthcare and agriculture. In fact, till recently, the task that was considered impossible even for a machine to perform now AI has turned into a reality. AI has considerably brought computers very close to imitating the human mind, thus, diminishing the gap

between man and machine. Today AI has found its application in a variety of fields such as education, finance, defence, agriculture and healthcare. Leading medical research institutions use AI for experiment, diagnosis, treatment and monitoring of deadly diseases. AI facilitates high-quality tissue sample analysis that paves the way for precise prognosis. In this day and age pharmaceutical companies are using AI for drug discovery and chemical analysis. With the help of AI doctors and healthcare professionals can precisely diagnose serious medical conditions such as cancer and stroke. In the education sector too, AI plays an important role. AI has proved to be an extremely handy tool to develop study material, student

evaluation, grading and monitoring. Thus, teachers save their precious time which they can utilise in productive academic pursuits as well as engage in meaningful discussions with students. AI-powered virtual educator robots substantially improve teaching and learning outcomes. Now let us see some of the imminent dangers of AI. The picture is not as rosy as it appears for the AI. Widespread indignant use of AI in almost every sphere of human activity is bound to raise some serious concerns concerning privacy, data security and transparency. Psychological well-being and social issues warrant our immediate attention. Companies are gradually replacing humans with AI-powered robots to perform

specific tasks at the workplace. This causes anxiety among employees and adversely affects their mental and emotional well-being. The technical dexterity of computers also is a major challenge for humans in the workplace. Of late AI AI-driven Deepfake videos and online Bots have spread at an alarming pace. Deepfake videos and online Bots are capable of orchestrating a fabricated consensus and manipulating public opinion. Fake news spreads like wildfire disturbing peace and leading to social unrest. Another disadvantage of AI is that it makes it extremely tough to distinguish between the original and the fake. AI-induced human rights violations should be stopped at the earliest. AI-powered changing

technology landscape has jeopardised data security, privacy, dignity, employment, equality, political rights and secrecy. Experts and sociologists have expressed reservations regarding the detrimental impacts of over-reliance on AI and human robots in important sectors like healthcare, law, marketing, accounting, education, management, technology and workplaces. AI's technological diligence, incredible analysis power and the ability to perform repetitive tasks may lead to huge layoffs. Consequently, this gives rise to a disproportionately high unemployment rate. Employees and the labourers may be subjected to discrimination and disparities and their professional and social security may be at stake. To

check the AI misuse a well-defined and comprehensive technological-labour policy is the need of the hour. Some of the measures that help workers survive in the AI-driven landscape are regular up-gradation of employee skills through appropriate training, honing up of technical skills and developing Soft skills. Lo and behold! Let's not lose sight of the fact that AI is completely devoid of human temperament, comprehension and creativity. The human mind is blessed with infinite creative power and Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). These supreme attributes propel human beings to an elevated plane and place them on a higher pedestal than machines. On the contrary, AI is data-driven and follows a defined tra-

jectory, thus, fails to capture human emotions, perception and the ability to perform tasks by adapting to a given environment. Since AI is in its nascent stage, therefore, it is too soon to assume that AI can take over humans shortly as humans continue to be the *fons et origo* of originality and innovation. Another threat that scares us is that if ever in the future technologically advanced machines take Man as their enemy then the entire human race may face existential crises. Pre-empting these dangers the US and the European countries have taken a locus standi to oppose AI and have taken stringent legal measures to curb AI's capricious use. (The writer is a professor; views are personal)

Dalit factor

With the general election on its last leg, the political landscape is marked by an undercurrent of discontent among Dalit voters. This discontent, emerging starkly in the absence of a concerted opposition campaign, challenges the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s narrative of a "Viksit Bharat" (developed India). Despite the BJP's portrayal of economic progress, many Dalit voters express scepticism and frustration over their economic conditions, revealing significant gaps in the government's development claims. A closer look at the sentiments of Dalit voters in key constituencies in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reveals a consistent theme of economic hardship. Surveys indicate that less than 10 per cent of Dalit respondents feel their income meets their needs or that their economic situation has improved. Additionally, over 60 per cent believe that economic inequality has worsened, highlighting a critical disconnect between the development narrative and the lived realities of many Dalits. Employment issues underscore the disconnect. With high rates of daily wage labour among Dalit respondents, significant numbers still report being unemployed, particularly among women. This economic strain is compounded by rising prices. Such economic grievances directly challenge the government's claims of inclusive development and question the effectiveness of economic policies. Interestingly, while economic discontent is prevalent, it does not translate into a clear voting preference against the BJP. The concept of "face" or leadership plays a significant role in voter preferences. Many Dalits continue to support Prime Minister Narendra Modi, influenced by his strong national presence and the carefully cultivated image of a decisive, capable leader. This personal appeal of Mr Modi often overshadows broader economic discontent, particularly among Dalit women who are more likely to support him despite facing higher unemployment rates. This paradox highlights a complex electoral dynamic. While economic issues are important, they do not always determine voting behaviour. Mr Modi's leadership persona, bolstered by extensive media coverage, creates a compelling narrative that many voters find appealing. This personal appeal is a crucial factor in the BJP's strategy, enabling Mr Modi to maintain substantial support despite the economic grievances voiced by many Dalits. The role of welfare schemes also adds another layer to this electoral complexity. While access to schemes like free rations and health insurance is notable, it does not uniformly translate into support for the BJP. However, these schemes contribute to the larger narrative of Mr Modi as a benefactor, helping sustain his personal appeal even when economic conditions do not visibly improve. In the context of the election, the discontent among Dalits signifies a significant challenge for the BJP. This dissatisfaction has surfaced organically, without a concerted opposition campaign, pointing to deep-seated economic issues that transcend political narratives. As the election nears its end, it remains to be seen how this discontent will shape the voting behaviour of Dalits and whether the appeal of Mr Modi's leadership can continue to overshadow the pressing economic realities faced by many.

Deficit Dynamics

India's trade data reveals a significant deficit with nine of its top 10 trading partners, including major economies like China, Russia, South Korea, and Hong Kong. While a trade deficit is often viewed through a lens of economic pessimism, it is crucial to understand the complexities behind these numbers before jumping to conclusions about their impact on India's economy. In the fiscal year 2023-24, India's trade deficit with China rose to \$85 billion, with Russia to \$57.2 billion, South Korea to \$14.71 billion, and Hong Kong to \$12.2 billion. Despite these rising deficits, India's overall trade deficit has actually narrowed to \$238.3 billion from \$264.9 billion in the previous year. These figures prompt a closer examination of the underlying factors and the broader economic implications. A trade deficit can be concerning if it signals a lack of competitiveness for India's exports in international markets or an over-reliance on imports. However, not all deficits are created equal. In many cases, especially for a developing economy like India, a trade deficit can reflect a strategic investment in future growth. Importing capital goods, raw materials, and intermediary products can boost domestic manufacturing and export capacity in the long run. For instance, India's deficit with China is partly due to the import of electronic components, machinery, and chemicals, which are critical for India's burgeoning tech and pharmaceutical industries. Similarly, imports from Russia predominantly consist of energy supplies, essential for India's energy security and industrial activity. While these deficits indicate a high volume of imports, they also underscore the integration of the Indian economy into global supply chains, which can enhance productivity and growth. However, there are legitimate concerns regarding sustainability of growing deficits. A large and persistent deficit can exert pressure on the domestic currency, leading to depreciation. This increases the cost of imports, potentially exacerbating the deficit further. Moreover, financing a substantial trade deficit might necessitate borrowing from foreign lenders, raising external debt and depleting foreign exchange reserves. These conditions can signal economic instability to international investors, reducing foreign direct investment and potentially slowing economic growth. To mitigate these risks, India needs a multi-faceted approach. First, boosting exports is essential. This requires improving the competitiveness of Indian goods and services in global markets through innovation, quality enhancement, and better market access. Trade agreements and partnerships can play a pivotal role here. Second, reducing unnecessary imports is crucial. Encouraging the production of high-demand goods domestically can help balance trade. Policies supporting Make in India and similar initiatives are steps in the right direction. Developing domestic industries requires robust infrastructure, ease of doing business, and a favourable regulatory environment. Managing currency and debt levels prudently is vital to avoid the pitfalls of excessive external borrowing. Strategic fiscal and monetary policies can help maintain economic stability while fostering growth. A balanced approach can transform these challenges into drivers of long-term economic resilience and prosperity.

Use of Ethanol

Switching to E100 (100 per cent ethanol) will be faster and easier than switching to both hydrogen-fuelled vehicles and EVs. The main reason is that the current gasoline supply chain and infrastructure can be used for E100. Brazil serves as a good example as the path to making E100 available in India. However, it will not happen on its own. It must be driven by government regulations and enforcement. India needs to make it mandatory that all cars sold from 2030 are capable of running on E100



Today ethanol has found its way into a range of applications from its original application as a beverage (wine and beer). It is used as a fuel, a chemical solvent, a disinfectant (hand sanitizer), in pharmaceuticals, cleaning, production of renewable hydrogen, cosmetics, perfumes, and as a feedstock for the production of chemicals.

The blending of ethanol into gasoline got its foothold in both the United Staes and Brazil, and both countries are no longer net importers of crude oil. In Brazil E100 sells for a lower price than gasoline and in the United States, both E15 and E85 sell for less than E10 and both have higher-octane numbers than E10. (E10 is the conventional gasoline sold in the United States.)

In the United States, the blending of ethanol into gasoline for use as an automotive fuel began in the 1970s due to high petroleum prices, and growing health and environmental concerns over the use of lead in gasoline created a need for a new source of "octane".

The value of ethanol as a "fuel oxygenate" to control carbon monoxide emissions was recognized, which resulted in increased production in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Ethanol burns cleaner than gasoline and is currently blended into fuel in many countries around the globe, including India. India started blending ethanol in a pilot programme in 2001. In the U.S., the majority of gasoline sold today has a minimum of 10 per cent ethanol.

Today in Brazil all gasoline has a mandatory ethanol blend requirement of 27 per cent (soon to be 30 per cent). Cars in Brazil can switch between any gasoline-ethanol blend up to 100 per cent ethanol.

Blending ethanol into fuel produces a range of benefits. By displacing hydrocarbons like aromatics in gasoline, ethanol reduces toxic air emissions, particulate matter PM2.5, carbon monoxide, nitrous oxides, and exhaust hydrocarbons. In many countries, including India, using domestically produced ethanol will reduce imports of the price volatile crude oil.

In addition producing ethanol from corn produces low-cost protein in the form of DDGS.

In general, the cost per unit of protein in DDGS is only 30 per cent of the cost per unit of protein in the grain itself. Lastly, production of ethanol creates jobs in the agricultural and other sectors of the economy. Ethanol provides the foundation for decarbonization of a large portion of the chemicals industry.

The benefits obtained by blending ethanol in fuel are even greater by using E100, 100 per cent ethanol, as an automotive fuel. All of the previously stated benefits of blending ethanol would be multiplied several times over by using E100.

The history of the use of E100 in Brazil has proven that it

is an effective and cost-efficient fuel. As demonstrated in Brazil, E100 can be used with some design modifications to the engine to account for the higher oxygen content in the fuel and the slightly higher volume of fuel that must be supplied to the engine. An engine that is properly modified to capitalize on the higher octane of E100, can deliver high power and good mileage.

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 1.3 million persons annually die prematurely due to health conditions that arise from exposure to indoor air pollutants from traditional fuels.

Ethanol is a proven alternative to these fuels. Ethanol is an effective clean-burning cooking fuel that reduces emissions of carbon monoxide, particulate matter, and other pollutants.

Ethanol is safer and easier to use, store and transport than biomass fuels. It does not produce smoke, sparks, or ash, and does not require chopping or drying of wood or charcoal. Bioethanol is one of the cooking fuels considered to be clean based on the 2014 WHO guidelines.

The aviation sector creates 13.9 per cent of the emissions from transport, making it the second largest source of transport GHG emissions. Through both government regulations and voluntary commitment, the sector has set ambitious goals to reduce its GHG emissions.

The use of growing proportions of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) is absolutely required to meet the targets. SAF can be produced from several feedstocks, some of which including used cooking oil are in very limited supply and are insufficient to meet the growing demand for SAF in India and globally.

According to some estimates the global annual demand for SAF is expected to exceed 18 billion liters by 2030. Ethanol-based SAF can meet the growing demand. Using proven technologies, ethanol can be converted to SAF and renewable diesel in a process referred to as ATJ or alcohol-to-jet. In general, it requires 1.7 liters of ethanol to produce 1 liter of SAF.

The production of SAF via the ATJ process will be a driving force in creating new ethanol

demand both in India and globally. Corn-based ethanol provides versatility and flexibility combined with the potential for nearly unlimited feedstocks at a cost-effective price.

When it comes to producing chemicals, ethanol is a foundation chemical for producing a range of renewable chemicals having low carbon intensities. Just as petroleum can be used to produce ethylene from which a range of many important chemicals and polymers are produced, ethanol can be used to produce ethylene in world-scale plants. Ethylene is the heart of today's trillion-dollar global petrochemicals market.

Petron Scientech's technology for the conversion of ethanol to ethylene has been in commercial use for over thirty years and provides very efficient energy utilization, low CAPEX, and low OPEX while offering low carbon intensity.

As a general rule-of-thumb, each metric ton of ethylene produced from ethanol saves three metric tons of GHG emissions. The ethylene produced from ethanol is a drop-in replacement for petrochemical ethylene with no changes to the downstream process being required. Renewable ethylene can also be used as a refrigerant and as a ripening agent for fruits and vegetables.

Known to exist for over 10,000 plus years, ethanol is a molecule whose true value and growing versatility has only been demonstrated over past few decades. The versatility of ethanol is similar to that of crude oil except for some significant and important differences. Ethanol is sustainable, renewable, and does not depend on imports from volatile areas of the world.

Ethanol can be used to produce vehicle and jet fuels, along with a range of value-added chemicals and polymers. Unlike sugar cane ethanol, corn ethanol production also produces a valuable cost-effective high protein co-product for use as feed.

Ethanol must be a foundational component of India's drive to reduce its GHG emissions with the need to develop new technologies. Use of E100 would help achieve that goal faster. 'Corn Ethanol' will lead to energy security, food security and decarbonization.



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Turnout irrelevant

SIR, This refers to the editorial 'Litmus test' (22May). Given the lower voter turnout compared to the previous elections, one cannot draw the conclusion that the initial enthusiasm that characterized Modi's campaign has waned.

Different surveys have claimed that Modi is still the top choice of 52 per cent people. Kerala where BJP is not anywhere in the primary contest saw a low voter turnout like North and West India. There are numerous explanations for the low voter turnout.

The rapid formation and breaking of coalitions have broken the morale of party workers who had until the last election toiled hard to get voters to the polling booth.

The tickets were given to 'outsiders' without taking them into confidence. The opposition has not been able to forge a working alliance, with the rebel fac-

tions of parties such as those led by Sharad Power and Uddhav Thakery joining NDA, thereby dampening the enthusiasm of the voters who could have voted for the opposition.

Rahul Gandhi's yatra has failed to inspire the passion of the voters who are disappointed to see Congress contesting elections on the shoulders of the regional satraps.

Besides, the skyrocketing corruption of leaders, with huge amounts of cash recovered from a Jharkhand minister's associate, and alleged sexual misconduct by former PM HD Deve Gowda's son HD Revanna have shaken the trust of the common people in democracy.

Incidents such as the last-minute withdrawal of the Congress candidate from Indore have broken the morale of the party workers. The turnout does not determine the outcome of

elections.

Despite a drop in turnout of about 6 per cent Indira Gandhi won the election in 1971 hands down, while a jump in voter turnout by 5 per cent in the next general election in 1977 saw her being trounced.

Yours, etc., Sudipta Ghosh, Jangipur, 27 May.

AIR SCARES

SIR, Recently, air travel has created fear such as 39 flamingos dying in an Emirates plane crash, turbulence in the Singapore Airlines flight due to climate change and a fire mishap in an Air India Express plane. Day by day these incidents are increasing. In most cases, the plane makes an emergency landing.

In this context, the Ministry of Civil Aviation should be cautious. Need of the hour is to check the mechanical condition of aircraft thoroughly, application of AI in weather forecast, review bird flying zones, etc.

Yours, etc., Nabnit Panigrahi, Rayagada, 28 May.

INDIA SHINES

SIR, Payal Kapadia, 38, has created history by becoming the first Indian film-maker to win the Grand Prix award at the Cannes film festival for *All We Imagine as Light*. This moment will certainly be inked in cinema history. Kapadia, along with three main women champions of her film, Kani Kusruti, Divya Prabha and Chhaya Kadam, posing with the prize has become the shot of the 77th edition of the festival, definitely for Indians. An Indo-French venture, which throws light on the story of two Malayali nurses working in Mumbai, is a big win for Indian cinema. The last time an Indian film was in the competition section was 30 years ago with Shaji N. Karun's *Swaham* in 1994.

India really shined at Cannes this year, with Kolkata's Anasuya Sengupta winning the Best Actress in the Un Certain Regard section for her turn in Konstantin Bojanov's *The Shameless*; British-Indian Karan Kandhari's *Sister Midnight* in the parallel Director's Fortnight selection; FTII student Chidananda S. Naik's short *Sunflowers Were The First Ones To Know* winning the top prize in the LaCinefond section, Cannes Classics releasing a renewed *Manthan*, Shyam Benegal's 1976 film, and so on. Kapadia had won the best documentary prize in 2021 and with the Grand Prix prize just three years later, she will inspire young film-makers to come out with their stories, and, hopefully, get the support they deserve.

Yours, etc., Sanjay Chopra, Mohali, 28 May.

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VN's carbon credit market has significant development potential

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has issued Directive No. 13/CT-TTg, to enhance management of carbon credits in order to implement the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) programme. The carbon market in Viet Nam will have significant developmental potential. Firstly, Viet Nam, as a developing country, has high production demands, resulting in increased greenhouse gas emissions due to environmentally-unfriendly technologies. Thus, there are considerable opportunities when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the country. Additionally, the geographical location plays a crucial role, as Viet Nam, a tropical country, has more potential for diversifying renewable energy sources such as solar and wind power, compared to other nations.

Moreover, Viet Nam has ample opportunities to attract green financial resources, not only focusing on climate change adaptation and extreme weather phenomena resistance, but also in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Therefore, the demand and opportunities for establishing a carbon credit market are closely linked to Directive 13/CT-TTg issued by the Prime Minister. However, it is crucial for ministries, sectors, localities and relevant agencies to evaluate the current status of greenhouse gas emissions, allocate greenhouse gas emission quotas and operate the market smoothly and attractively for investors to engage in carbon credit trading. This is an ambitious goal requiring the involvement of various

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stakeholders, including ministries, sectors, localities, Vietnamese enterprises and support from international organisations, to channel green finance into helping domestic enterprises transition to green. Green capital, with many preferential incentives supporting enterprises, ensures profit recovery and contributes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, moving towards Viet Nam's stated goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

The most significant challenge currently for Viet Nam is to accurately determine the greenhouse gas emissions of major emitting enterprises, because if we fail in this, it will pose a significant obstacle for State management agencies. Allocation of greenhouse gas emission quotas to enterprises needs to be carried out so that enterprises know and can reduce emissions, creating surplus quotas for carbon credit trading. Therefore, the most crucial task in Viet Nam is to determine the allocation of greenhouse gas emission quotas for domestic enterprises currently in operation and production.

For Vietnamese export enterprises, they must deal with several issues related to trade and export barriers, especially after the European Union introduced the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) in 2023. Therefore, goods in some of the sectors regulated by the European Union, such as iron, steel, cement, fertilisers, hydrogen and electricity, exported to the EU, if they are not taxed in the host country, will also be taxed at Europe's borders, equivalent to nearly US\$100 for a tonne of CO2. Vietnamese enterprises within the global supply chain, with customers in Europe, are at risk of this tax. Apart from the European Union, other countries worldwide like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented similar mechanisms. This means Vietnamese enterprises need to equip themselves with knowledge and calculations of greenhouse gas emission intensities per product to avoid trade barriers, thereby enhancing competitiveness and brand recognition.



A feast for the soul

BASAB DASGUPTA

Participation in a celebration of the “*Rabindra Jayanti*” (Tagore’s birthday) a couple of weeks ago prompted me to think about Tagore songs and write this essay.

If you are born in West Bengal, especially in Kolkata, you cannot escape Tagore songs. I was no exception and grew up listening to hundreds of Tagore songs even when I did not want to. Whether it was a college reunion function, a would-be bride demonstrating her singing skill to an entourage from the groom’s house, a musical festival of any kind or background music in a movie, Tagore songs were the automatic choice.

I must confess that although I liked the lyrics, I was not a fan of Tagore songs mainly because of the slow, monotonous and similar sounding tunes. The use of musical instruments was very limited, reportedly because of restrictions imposed by the Viswa Bharati University because they owned rights to all these songs at the time. There was no song which aroused a feeling of unbridled joy or intense passion or an urge to get up and dance. I got hooked on Bollywood songs during my teenage years and the choice of musical genres was limitless when I came to the US.

I never understood the obsession of Bengalis with Tagore songs. It is so blatant and obvious that people from other parts of India make fun of the lack of diversity in our musical taste. For a long time, I believed that the reason for this obsession was Tagore receiving the Nobel Prize and the Knighthood (which he subsequently relinquished) for his work in the era of British rule when such global recognition of native talents were unheard



of. Bengalis were so proud of his international fame that they accepted him as the master and the one to follow no matter what he wrote. Also, traditional puritanical mindsets precluded them from listening to Bollywood songs because of perceived lewdness and opportunities for listening to Western or other foreign music were very limited.

It is only recently, in my late life, that I started to appreciate the reason behind this Tagore-mania. I believe that it has more to do with the volume and variety of messages of his work than the music itself. Tagore reportedly wrote and composed music for 2,232 songs (according to Wikipedia). He wrote songs for virtually every occasion and every emotion that a Bengali person goes through in his/her life. By contrast, the Beatles who also composed songs for a variety of circumstances have only 188 original songs.

As a result, regardless of the situation you are in, physically, emotionally or geographically, you can find a

Tagore song you can identify with. Of course, the slow tempo of the song resonates with the chords inside our Bengali hearts. I do like many Tagore songs and have analyzed them to understand why I like them.

My most favorite one is “*Tui phele eschhis kare mon monre amar, tai janam gelo shanti peli na re*”. It is a perfect description of emotions of an immigrant Bengali growing old in this country and moves me like no other Tagore song. Of course, I knew that I left behind my family, friends, neighbours and familiar things when I came to the US, but there was always hope for something better. Now in old age, I look behind and realize that there was nothing significantly better and I will never be able to regain what I left behind; but I cannot put my fingers around who or what that was. Was it the soft soil with green rice fields, was it the monsoon season or was it a part of my soul? I will never attain that bliss I was hoping for. The lyrics capture this sentiment perfectly.

Another of my favorites is “*Jhara pata go, Ami tomari dale*”. This song is a perfect metaphor for my thoughts at the present age. I have enjoyed my life – the joy and the sorrow; and now the time has come to leave the branch of the “tree” that kept me grounded, wearing a saffron-coloured outfit, and being blown away in the wind.

I love music and find it to be the medium for expressing romantic feelings. Whenever I developed a fondness for a woman, I could only say my thoughts silently in my heart, using the lyrics and tune of a song, even when the woman had no idea about my emotions and was not probably that crazy about music. Tagore said it perfectly, “*Ami tomari sange bendhechi amar pran...tumi jano na*”.

I remember whenever I was sad during my teenage years, I would just listen to “*Baje koruno sure*”, simply to weep silently because it gave me a cathartic cleansing.

My thought of divorce is reflected in the song, “*amar e path tomar pather anek doore*”. What can express my infatuation with American women better than the line, “*Ami chinigo chini tomare ogo bideshini*”? On numerous occasions in my life, I had to make decisions about some tasks going against the recommendations and preferences of others; I just remembered the line, “*jodi tor dak shume keu na ase*”. Then there are songs with messages of hope and optimism amid pain and misery as in, “*Ananda dhara bohiche blubane*”.

I can probably think of more examples. However, my point is not that I can correlate almost all of my life experiences with lyrics of a Tagore song. I can probably do that with Bollywood or Beatles songs as well. My point is that Tagore has composed so many songs that it is not just me, but every Bengali who

can identify with a song regardless of his/her state of mind: joy, sadness, romance, spirituality, patriotism, enjoyment of nature, love for children, travel and so on. This is why he is universally popular with almost all Bengalis, regardless of their social status, educational level, age etc.

An analogy comes to mind. You are part of a large group planning a meal at a restaurant. You may prefer Indian food because of your upbringing and may want to go to an Indian restaurant. A friend of yours may prefer a French restaurant. Some may like Mexican food and so on. Now imagine a restaurant offering all kinds of food imaginable in one place. So, there will be no argument; everyone in the group will agree to go to this restaurant and enjoy the meal. Moreover, if you are planning to throw a party with catered food, you will probably go to the owner of this restaurant to supply food because you know that no one will then complain about the food. Also, whenever you are feeling hungry, you are likely to go to this restaurant because you know that you will find something you like there.

Yes, Tagore songs provide that smorgasbord of food for the soul. I wish that Tagore songs would be translated into multiple languages which would be recorded with an assortment of musical instruments. Some compositions could even be changed a little bit to increase the pace of the song. It has already started to happen. An example is the song “*Piyu bole, piya bole*” from the Bollywood movie “*Parineeta*”. Perhaps someday music of all of India and not just Bengali music will belong to Tagore.

(The writer, a physicist who worked in industry and academia, is a Bengali settled in America.)

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE figures of India’s export and import trade for April are almost identical with those of the same month last year. This can hardly be considered satisfactory; for what is urgently needed is a steady progression upwards from the slump. In the last month here has been a drop in the value of exports amounting to Rs. 1,103 lakhs, and the balance of trade is against this country. Exports, we know, pay for imports, and if the imports are now to be cut down by a tariff, our protectionist economists will doubtless congratulate themselves on having helped to balance the trade budget by reducing its volume. The Tacitean epigram at the expense of those who make a solitude and call it peace might be applied with a difference to the Tariff protectionists who make a slump and call it fair trade.

NEWS ITEMS

SIR MALCOLM HAILEY ASSUMES GOVERNORSHIP OF PUNJAB ON MAY 31

A NOTIFICATION issued by the Political Department, Punjab Government, states that Sir Malcolm Hailey will receive charge of office of Governor of the Punjab from His Excellency Sir Edward Maclagan in the Bombay Civil Secretariat on Saturday, May 31 at 3-30 p.m. Oaths of office and allegiance will be administered to him by the Chief Justice High Court, Bombay, under arrangements to be made by the Bombay Government.

Sir Malcolm and Lady Hailey will leave Colaba Station, Bombay, at 4-0 p.m. on May 31 and arrive at Simla on Monday June 2 at 3-41 p.m., where, they will be met by the Commissioner, Ambala Division, Deputy Commissioner of Simla, Officer Commanding Troops, Simla, and Superintendent of Police, Simla. A salute of 17 guns will be fired as His Excellency alights.

Sir Malcolm and Lady Hailey will then motor to Barnes Court where they will be received by members of his Executive Council, Ministers of the Punjab Government, and Ruling Chiefs present.

MILITARY CONTESTS

Good Programme at Bangalore

AT the boxing tournament arranged here by Mr. E. It. Fisher, of Calcutta, there were nine fights on the first night, and all but the light and bantam-weight bouts were four round contests. Corporal Tribe, 5th /6th Dragoons, showed good form in beating Pte. Howell, Wiltshire Regiment. The fight between L/Cpl. McNally (Dragoons) and Private Boissell (Wilt-shires) was very spirited. The men had met three times previously. Boissell won the first; the second resulted in a draw, and the third fought at Kolar was won by McNally. Last night McNally again won with something to spare.

Results:-

Light-weight contests:-Pte. Chandler (Beds and Herts) beat Pte. Hickman (Wiltshire Regiment) on points. Pte. White (Wilts) beat Trooper Tomkins (5th/6th Dragoons) on points.

Bantam-weights:-Pte. Silvrn (Beds and Herts) knocked out Pte. Morris (Wilts) in the second round Pte. Tucker (Wilts) knocked out Pte. Farrell (Beds and Herts) in the second round.

Feather-weights:-Cpl. McNally (5th/6th Dragoons) beat Pte. Boissell (Wilts) on points. Pte. Hughes (Wilts) knocked out Pte. Ward (Beds and Herts) in the second round. Private Wilcox (5th/6th Dragoons) beat Pte. Taylor (Wilts). The referee stopped the light at the end of the third round. Cpl. Penny (Wilts) knocked out Pte. Hope (Wilts) in the third round.

Middle-weight:- Cpl. Tribe (5th/6th Dragoons) beat Pte. Howell (Wilts) on points.

COTTON BOARD OF GREATEST SERVICE TO BOMBAY

THE Cotton Contracts Board which was constituted to exercise control over the operations of the cotton trade in 1918 has just terminated its activities, and its assets are now vested in the East India Cotton Association, Limited, for the benefit of the cotton trade of the city of Bombay.

The Government, in a resolution highly commends the useful work done by the Cotton Contracts Board during its existence as it was of the greatest service to the commercial life of Bombay under the guidance of Mr. G. Wiles, I.C.S. The Governor-in-Council also acknowledges the services rendered to the Board by Mr. G. H. Cowan, I.C.S., during his chairmanship and by Sir Purshotamdas Tliakurdas as a member of the Board.

US actions pushing China and Russia closer

MALEEHA LODHI

With election politics dictating current US foreign policy moves, Washington’s actions are driving China and Russia much closer in a strengthened strategic partnership. The unintended consequences of American policies were laid bare by the outcome of the recent meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Beijing.

This was Putin’s first overseas visit after he secured a fifth term as president. It took place against the backdrop of tough US warnings to China not to support Russia’s war effort in Ukraine, where Russian forces are reported to be advancing in an offensive in the northeast. Washington imposed sanctions earlier this month on several Chinese companies for allegedly supplying Russia with components for military use. This happened immediately after Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Beijing, where he raised US concerns about China’s military dealings with Russia. This met with a sharp response from Chinese officials, who dismissed US accusations as “groundless”. Foreign Minister Wang Yi shot back, saying “China is neither the creator of the Ukraine crisis nor a party to it”.

Subsequently, the Biden administration significantly raised tariffs on Chinese imports including electric vehicles, computer chips and medical products in a bid to woo blue-collar voters in America’s swing states, where the president is trailing his rival, Donald Trump. This added to a growing stream of US trade restric-



tions which Beijing sees as aimed at containing China and thwarting its economic progress. Predictably, the latest curbs provoked a furious response from Chinese officials.

The wide-ranging joint statement issued during Putin’s visit directed strong words at the US. It accused Washington of following a policy of “dual containment” towards China and Russia and engaging in “hegemonic behaviour.” “The United States,” it said “still thinks in terms of the Cold War and is guided by the logic of bloc confrontation putting the security of ‘narrow groups’ above regional security and stability, which creates a security threat for all countries in the region.” The statement criticised America’s Indo-Pacific strategy and also denounced US missile deployments around the world that “pose a direct security threat to China and Russia”. Both pledged to counter America’s “destructive and hostile course” that they cast as undermin-

ing global peace and stability.

The lengthy, comprehensive statement also listed the steps the two countries planned to take to solidify military ties and scale up economic relations while identifying other areas of cooperation for a “new era of partnership”. Both restated support for the other’s core interest. Russia reiterated its recognition of Taiwan as an “inalienable” part of China. China joined the Russian critique of Nato activities in Europe. The statement also expressed their shared view on North Korea. Conspicuous by its absence was any Chinese endorsement of Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine.

In fact, China has adopted a ‘neutral’ position on the Ukraine conflict and offered to be a mediator in the crisis. From the outset, it had misgivings about Russia’s 2022 invasion. It often communicated these to Moscow and occasionally even publicly voiced them in a veiled manner.

In the meeting between Xi and Putin on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in 2022, the Chinese leader conveyed his reservations over escalation of the Ukraine crisis. Putin later acknowledged that “concerns and questions” were raised by the Chinese president. China’s repeated calls for a ceasefire and negotiations for a political solution reflects its strong preference for a speedy conclusion to the war. Last year, it also offered a 12-point plan for a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis.

But hostile US actions and its trade and tech war with China have only aligned Beijing more closely with Russia and relegated differences with Moscow on Ukraine and other issues to the background. To be sure, China-Russia interests do not converge on many issues especially as China, as a rising global power, has nothing to gain by upending or destabilising the international system, while Russia has few compunctions to act responsibly. Moreover, they confront different challenges and have different stakes in global stability.

US threats of sanctions against Chinese banks and companies engaged in transactions that can aid Russia’s military machine have apparently made Beijing somewhat cautious. Nevertheless, Beijing has responded strongly to US allegations that it is supporting Putin’s war by supplying critical weapon components. It has countered these charges by insisting it is not supplying lethal arms and it “prudently handles the export of dual-use items in accordance with laws and regulations”. Mounting US pressure

on this count has led Beijing to rebuff Washington by strengthening its military relations with Russia. Their deepening strategic cooperation has in turn perturbed Western nations.

Uneasy China may be with Putin’s Ukraine adventure, but what the war has done is to significantly deepen its economic ties with Russia and tied the economies of the two countries more closely. For Russia, facing Western economic sanctions, growing economic relations with China have enabled it to mitigate the impact of Western financial and trade curbs. In 2023, two-way trade between them reached a record high of \$240 billion. The bulk of this trade is conducted in rubles and renminbi.

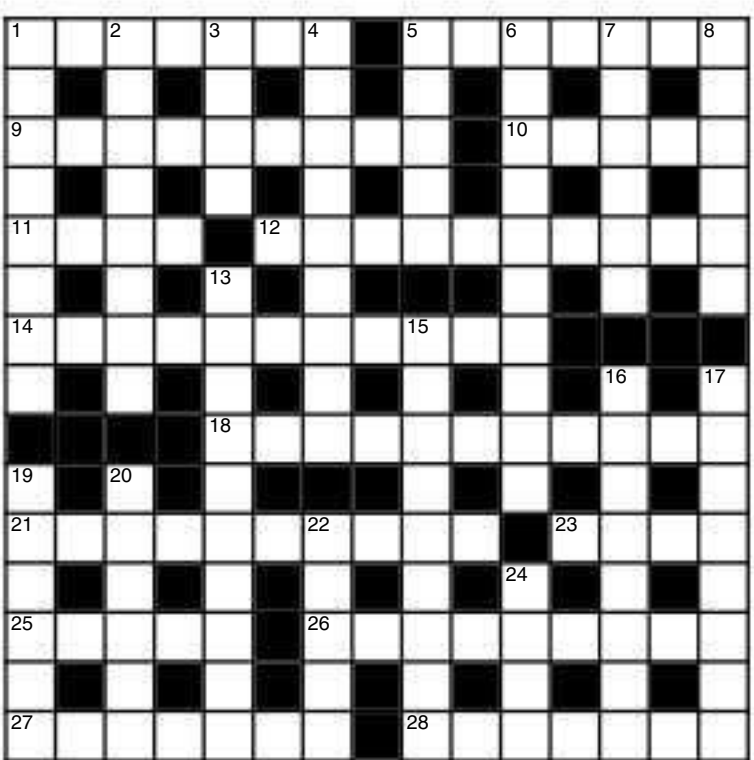
Last year, Russia also became China’s top source of oil supply, overtaking Saudi Arabia, providing discounted, cheaper crude. China is Russia’s biggest trading partner, exporting a range of products from cars and machinery to electronics.

Both countries face pressure and sanctions — on different grounds — from the US in an increasingly coercive and punitive approach, even if Western actions against Russia are of a different order. This has created a greater incentive and common interest for China and Russia to join forces to resist US pressure. While there will be limits to the Sino-Russian relationship over time because the interests of the two countries don’t converge on many counts, for now, US policies have ensured they will maintain a close alignment to counter Washington’s pressure.

Dawn/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292795



YESTERDAY’S SOLUTION

HURRICANE LOVER
A E S E T E E
CHAPTER AND
K L L I T A T O N
IDARIESAY WALNUT
N L L B T A R
GRENADIER HOLLY
D S O A
FAITH TRAINLOAD
O C O S D X R
CREAMY ABUDHABI
U F I G A U L F
SHRINKRESISTANT
E E E I E T T E
DREAM TEDDYBEAR

ACROSS

- Vocal encouragement for a Eurasian statesman (7)
- MacGuffin in Citizen Kane got out of bed and returned call (7)
- Recovered soldiers made an allegation (9)
- Occasional drinker arrived, then left (5)
- Present writer adopts son (4)
- Pieces composed by partner in particular (10)
- One devastated without sex, following a particular philosophy (11)

DOWN

- Left in denial after losing case over drug (8)
- Participant in your descent or ascent, oddly (8)
- Place with Mormons making do with one husband (4)
- Mad as a Turk, mother admitted illustrating Hindu text (4,5)
- High spot when Miss Jones stripped off (5)
- Curt and concise but lacking nothing, somehow more to the point (10)
- Dickensian beadle, beginning to behave like Uriah Heep? (6)
- Stalls of French poet’s works (6)

- I deal with basic training in general (10)
- European wild cat, chasing off bugs doing the backstroke? (9)
- Greek character stays erect when aroused, and that’s not all (2,6)
- Angry for the most part being grabbed by a jerk? That’s puzzling! (8)
- A little clique became a province (6)
- Constitutional state, initially being linked with Scandinavia (6)
- Sanction lifted on a divided land (5)
- Heroic subject having to give way to English (4)

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





THOUGHT FOR THE DAY: Patriotism is when love of your own people comes first; nationalism, when hate for people other than your own comes first.

— CHARLES DE GAULLE



Heat wave, a self-inflicted wound

India established a new record on Wednesday, according to the IMD, when it reported the highest ever temperature at 52.3 degrees Celsius. And that dubious honour goes to the national capital. A place called Mungeshpur, which was in the news a couple of days earlier for recording the highest temperature in Delhi, reported the highest ever temperature at 52.3 degree Celsius. Delhi's outskirts are the first to experience the hot winds flowing in from Rajasthan, which too has been in the grip of a heat wave for several days, IMD said. Heat waves around this time of the year are not unusual but this year these have broken all records. Along with the rest of the world, India too is paying a price for the reckless exploitation of nature for so-called economic development. Mankind most shamelessly is playing havoc with wind and air, sea and mountains, hills and plains, and everything in between. Pressure on natural resources is so intense that at the peak of summer water supply in most cities and towns, kasbas and villages becomes scarce. The Delhi government, barely able to hide its mismanagement of the metropolis, has given notice of water shortage, restricting supply to only one time during the day. Coming during the sizzling heat wave sweeping the city it is a double blow to the over two crore Delhi residents. More than a quarter of Delhi lives in shanties and slums in kuchha houses vulnerable most to the harsh environmental conditions. Demand for electricity in the capital has risen to over 8,302 megawatts as people run air-conditioners and other appliances to try and keep the heat away. Paradoxically, cooling systems further contribute to the degradation of environment. Meanwhile, a recent report by an NGO in the field of environment highlighted how big metros such as Mumbai, Chennai, Bengaluru, Kolkata, Hyderabad and, of course, Delhi are paying the price of increasing building activity and concretization. Effects of heat waves are made still more severe by man-made factors such as deforestation, excessive use of water, coal and petroleum products, unbridled construction activity, increasing reliance on ACs, refrigerators et al. Never before has man pelted his environment so recklessly as in the last couple of centuries with the degradation gaining momentum in recent years. Urban centers have become virtual ovens where people more and more rely on energy-heavy devices to keep away the ill-effects of heat and cold — only for them to further add to the depletion of the ozone layer. Economic development unlinked from environmental concerns would eventually prove detrimental to the survival of mankind. Already, the poor are being made to pay a heavy price for the greed of the rich for swanky malls and power-guzzling multistory towers in the expanding concrete zones in urban centers. Even the countryside has not escaped the building boom with small towns and villages too increasingly moving away from the Gandhian ideal of simple living and high thinking. Everyone loves the comforts of energy-heavy living, be it in big metropolises or small towns.

Without realizing how harmful it is for the health of planet earth that we habitually use devices ostensibly meant to make life easier for us which, in turn, contribute to the slow but steady degradation of the environment. It may have hardly occurred to people that the black-tarred roads contribute to global warming. Small wonder then in some parts of the western world and West Asia they have dispensed with the traditional black-tarring of roads and are giving them a white veneer. Meanwhile, holding parliamentary elections when large parts of the country are in the grip of a heat wave, with temperatures rising above the mid-forties, may have been unavoidable, but in future with an all-party consensus these could be rescheduled to avoid both extreme summer and peak winter. The festival of democracy should not become a burden for the very people who participate in it with great enthusiasm, that is the poor and under-privileged who cannot insulate themselves from the ill-effects of extreme weather conditions. The battle against environmental degradation may require a global effort, but we, as a nation, cannot forgo our effort to save humanity from its own ravages. It is never too late to start being environmentally-conscious, environmentally-friendly.

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FPJ Archives

INDIA 75 YEARS AGO
MAY 30, 1949



JAPANESE GROW FOOD ON ROADS AND SEA SHORE

Bombay, Sunday. What attracted people most at the Bombay Suburban District Congress Workers' one day camp today at Juhu was a Japanese pedal charkha which Mr. Pranlal Kapadia, prominent Village Industries Organiser, had brought all the way from Japan.

The growing irrelevance of Mayawati and the BSP

Comment

✦ A L I Chougule



Not long ago, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was a force to reckon with in Uttar Pradesh politics and its supremo, Mayawati, was an influential leader in both state and national politics. In a state where Dalits make up nearly 20% of the population, Mayawati symbolised Dalit empowerment and was hailed as an agent of change both when she was the chief minister — she was UP's chief minister five times and completed her only full term in office when she won a simple majority in the assembly in 2007 — and after, as her strong presence in political sphere pushed social justice and Dalit assertion to the fore. But all this was before 2014.

Today, the fiery figure of Dalit politics and a champion of their rights is a pale shadow of her former self. Whether she has deliberately chosen to be silent and dysfunctional or has been forced to take a back seat is difficult to say, but it is certainly sad to see Mayawati down and out of the heat and dust of electoral politics. Ideally, the leader of a party with more than 20% vote share in a politically important state that sends 80 Lok Sabha MPs to parliament

should have been at the forefront of forcefully mounting a challenge to BJP's dominance in UP. But Mayawati has been unusually quiet during the ongoing election, preferring to fight the 2024 Lok Sabha poll alone instead of being an active part of the Opposition's I.N.D.I.A bloc.

By choosing to go solo, Mayawati is not only expected to divide the Opposition vote, her party is also unlikely to get a good number of seats in a triangular contest, though BSP will have some impact on the results. This sounds strange because Mayawati's party had won 20 Lok Sabha seats from UP with a vote share of 27.5% in 2009. In 2004, BSP had won 19 seats from UP and its vote share was 24.6%. In 2014, during the Modi wave, BSP did not win a single seat but the party polled about 20% of the votes in UP. In the next general election, Mayawati fought the polls in an alliance with the Samajwadi Party (SP), and her party polled the same 20% votes and won 10 seats. Strangely, Mayawati refused to fight the ongoing polls in an alliance with SP and the Congress. Why?

Political circles have been abuzz with various stories, rumours, and speculations over Mayawati's snub to the I.N.D.I.A bloc. The Congress, keen to have the BSP on board, did reach out to Mayawati to be part of the Opposition's alliance. One rumour has it that Mayawati was even promised that she would be the prime ministerial face, while according another rumour, she demanded

it as precondition to join the alliance. Ultimately, the alliance did not materialise because, according to reports, Mayawati made such outrageous demands for various seats that she seemed keen to undermine SP's electoral prospects rather than helping the alliance to take on the BJP's challenge in the crucial 80 Lok Sabha seats in UP that the BJP is heavily banking on to win parliamentary majority.

There must be a reason for Mayawati choosing to lie low. Apparently, according to media reports, Mayawati would rather be irrelevant than land up in jail. This is because she fears corruption cases

For now, it seems the Dalit leader and her party are unable or disinclined to come out of the difficult spot they are in

against her being initiated or revived, in case she starts opposing the BJP forcefully. By choosing to fight the polls alone, she has made peace with the BJP, even if it costs BSP electorally and diminishes her politically. Her silence may be tactical to earn a reprieve from corruption cases, but her fading mass appeal and the unchecked decline of her party whose rise to power was once a striking symbol of empowerment of the most marginalised and underprivileged sections in UP, also underlines a larger story of Dalit aspirations being encompassed by or subsumed

under other parties.

The sinking of the BSP means political space ceded to other parties. This is a result of being out of step with the changing polity over the past decade. There could be other factors contributing to the increasing irrelevance of Mayawati and her party. For instance, Mayawati's inability to counter Modi and his party's aggressive strategy to woo Dalits, especially the non-Jatav Dalits by combining Hindutva with welfare politics. This has also helped BJP make inroads into Mayawati's core support base — Jatav Dalits. Besides, the functioning of the BSP on which Mayawati holds a tight control, the culture of inac-

cessibility cultivated by her and the absence of street level mobilisation in BSP have taken a toll on the party and its leader.

The BSP's numbers over the years tell a story of its shrinking vote share and seats in both parliament and state assembly. While BSP performed well for almost three decades since the 1990s, its decline began with BJP's stunning show in Uttar Pradesh in 2014 when the 71 from party swept the state with 71 seats, a monumental increase from the 10 seats it had won in the 2009 general election. The only saving

grace for the BSP in 2014 was its vote share: 20% despite winning nothing. To compound her problems, Mayawati's party also performed very poorly in the subsequent 2017 assembly election which the BJP swept with a massive 312 seats; BSP won only 19 seats but had a vote share of 22%. At its peak in 2007, BSP's vote share was 30%.

In 2022 UP assembly poll, the BSP won just one seat out of 403 and its vote share crashed to just over 12%. It is not difficult to infer that the BSP's loss has been the BJP's gain: nearly half of its vote share seems to have shifted to the Hindutva party, thanks to the BJP government's welfare schemes, both state and Central. If fear of central agencies is one reason for Mayawati's silence in the current election, BSP's falling vote share and seats in successive elections since 2014 has quietened the fiery Dalit leader who once again will end up with a poor show in this election.

This is not to say that the BSP cannot be re-energised and Mayawati will not bounce back in state and national politics. But for now, it seems the Dalit leader and her party are unable or disinclined to come out of the difficult spot they are in. Certainly the 2024 Lok Sabha poll is a crucial test for Mayawati and her party's future.

The writer is a senior independent Mumbai-based journalist. He tweets at @ali_chougule

Rising temperatures, greater risks to your food

South by Southeast

✦ Patralekha Chatterjee



In India, the food debate continues to be at its fiercest along the vegetarian/non-vegetarian fault line. In a polarised milieu, what is less discussed is how climate change is affecting the diets of both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. It is time to wake up.

Take fish. Industrial fishing alongside climate change is taking a heavy toll on the tuna fish.

"Tuna population in the Indian ocean has shown a huge decline since the 1950s, due to industrial fisheries which have wiped out a large part of the tuna population. Climate change has been an additional stressor," says Roxy Mathew Koll, climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune, and a lead author of recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports.

"I eat a lot of fish. We order through a Bangalore-based company. What I am noticing — fish like sardines are available even during those periods when trawling is banned, during the monsoon season, when they are supposed to breed. Many times, the fish we get are tiny, which means that they are being caught early, before they have gone through the breeding cycle. This means they did not get a chance to breed and marine wealth is not being replenished. They catch them

earlier before the breeding cycle. We need to have better regulations on industrial fishing."

Lax regulations on industrial fishing at a time of warming seas or marine heatwaves heighten the risks facing fish.

Fish, says Koll, are quite resilient in times of warming waters. "When the water is extremely warm, they move to cooler waters. Or they might dive deeper: This poses a challenge to fishermen. Because warming waters impact the distribution of fish. Fishers may not find fish where they used to find them earlier or they may not find the species. Warming waters or marine heatwaves have led to mass fish mortality in many places. There has been a collapse of mass fisheries in the United States."

But there is a problem when it comes to India. "We do not have data or real understanding about how marine heatwaves have impacted or are currently impacting fisheries in the Indian Ocean though we expect impacts like fish mortality and change in distribution of species. We do not yet have close monitoring of these issues, or transdisciplinary research into interactions between marine heatwaves and fisheries," adds Koll.

Take wheat, one of India's main staple crops. Extreme heat during the critical growth phase such as the germination phase significantly and negatively affects wheat yields, points out Aditi Mukherji, scientist with CGIAR, an international research organisation working on agriculture and another IPCC lead author. "Last year, when South Asia had extended heat waves in early March and all the way through

April, wheat yields even in places like Punjab and Haryana (where there is full irrigation coverage) were affected. This is what we call physical limits to adaptation, because it is physiologically impossible for wheat to germinate at temperatures that touched 48 degrees during the flowering and germination phase, even when adaptation measures like irrigation are available," she says.

Extreme heat, droughts, floods, cyclones, melting glaciers, rising seas, marine heatwaves are having a

Ignoring the inseparable connection between food, climate, economy, and the environment would be suicidal for every country, including India

knock-on effect on the availability and quality of food, triggering a spike in food prices, threatening food security and livelihoods of millions across the world.

Asia remained the world's most disaster-hit region from weather, climate, and water-related hazards in 2023, according to a recent report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

Climate change is also impacting the nutritional value of our food. Research led by Sam Myers, Director of the Planetary Health Alliance at the Harvard Chan School, shows that when food crops like corn, rice, soy, and wheat, are exposed to CO2 at levels predicted for 2050, the plants lose as much as 10% of their zinc, 5% of their iron, and 8% of their protein content.

I hate to break this to fellow coffee lovers — there are climate impacts

in every cup of coffee. Indian coffee has been hit by climate change. Ditto with coffee in Southeast Asia. A recent study by Dr Warathida Chaipayap, assistant professor at Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy, pointed out that warming temperatures and shifting weather patterns threaten coffee crops, putting the entire industry at stake. This affects small scale cultivators as well as bustling coffee shops "Climate change severely impacts the coffee industry throughout its supply chain, particularly jeopardising the

coffee plantation and livelihood of millions of coffee farmers. The impact of climate change on the coffee industry has manifested in lower coffee yields and spiking prices in recent years," says the study titled A 2030 Roadmap for Climate Adaptation in the Coffee Bean Belt of Southeast Asia and supported by Heinrich Boll Stiftung, Southeast Asia. It advocates regional collaboration among coffee stakeholders in the region. Eggs have also been affected. Last month, the president of the Philippine Egg Board Association lamented that extreme heat was affecting egg production due to reduction in feed-intake. Eggs are getting smaller, he said.

The vicious heatwave engulfing Southeast Asia in recent weeks has also affected the famous durian, among Thailand's most famous and lucrative exports. The yields have

been smaller; costs have gone up.

Rising temperature means rising risks for India's poultry farmers. A spokesperson of the Poultry Federation of India told Asian Agribiz, a portal, that only those farms that have sufficient water can operate well. "The farms also need extra water to run sprinklers on the roofs of poultry sheds and foggers inside the sheds to bring down temperatures."

The signs are everywhere. Last month, at a workshop for journalists on understanding and reporting climate, air pollution and health at The Sunway Centre for Planetary Health at Sunway University, Malaysia, scientists spoke about drying ponds and depleting fish catch in India and saltwater intrusion in the Mekong Delta, rice bowl of Vietnam, and the damages to our food, water, and health security.

A brutal heat wave continues to envelop huge swathes of India. But climate change has not really featured in speeches in the seven-phase national polls. Top political analysts who typically explain this away by saying politics and economics are paramount in India, here is my riposte — there is nothing on earth that climate change does not impact. Ignoring the inseparable connection among food, climate, economy, and the environment would be suicidal for every country including India, the fifth-largest economy in the world, already grappling with child malnutrition and soaring food prices.

Patralekha Chatterjee is a writer and columnist who spends her time in South and Southeast Asia, and looks at modern-day connects between the two adjacent regions. X: @Patralekha2011



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Challenges for criminal justice system

It's shocking that a drunk minor driving ruthlessly in Pune killed two people. Across India, there's sufficient evidence that the criminal justice system — police, judiciary, legal aid and prisons — is all but broken. The first link in the chain sets the tone for what comes later. If the process followed by the police is infirm, it will weaken subsequent prosecution. The biggest process error is that it took the police eight hours to collect the minor's blood sample, which is inexcusable because it dilutes the alcohol level in blood. There are two challenges the criminal justice system faces. One, is the manpower shortage in key areas. For example, there are 21 judicial officers for a million people when it should ideally be 50. Second is the credibility problem. There's a feeling that if not for public outrage, the course of the Pune case could have been different. A functioning justice system will also discipline parents who encourage lawlessness.

Sanjay Chopra



Heavy rains and trees

The monsoon has not yet arrived but some of the southern states especially Kerala and Tamil Nadu are witnessing heavy torrents for the past few days putting day today life completely out of gear and along with it problems created by sudden rain floods and diseases making life disastrous. Precautions taken can mitigate rain woes. Along with flash floods on streets falling of trees also cause sudden mishaps and even turn out to be life takers. Trees no doubt offer shade and do function as "oxygen givers", but at the same time they pose heavy disaster and are a menace to the public if their growth is unchecked. Planting trees and saving trees is good but when the same turn out to be a threat to human life the same protectors turn out to be killers. Definitely the authority concerned or the organisation that took the job to plant them will have to either prune or cut them to avoid mishaps. Organisations and departments while planting trees must definitely bear in their mind that with the planting of saplings in the name of celebrations and functions their work is not over, truly it is their task to see that the growing saplings do not turn out to be "death causing green monsters" especially

during rainy season as most of these green giants fall down partially or fully during heavy downpour causing severe damage to life and property. The lackadaisical attitude and the "perennial ignoring" attitude of the authorities to check the growth of trees end up in severe destruction to the life of citizens, vehicles and property.

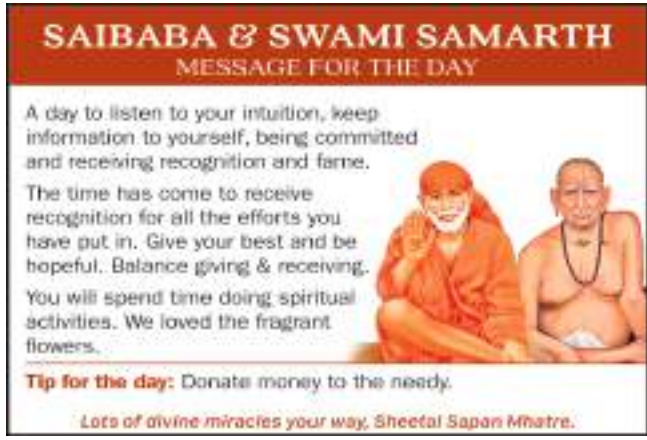
M Pradyu

School of life

Many parents blame schools and teachers for bad performance or behaviour of their children. However, they fail to realise that their child spends more time with them than in school. Parents are the first teacher of their child. Moreover, the social environment plays an important role in influencing a child's behaviour. Parents must watch where their child is going, who are his friends, what type of people he spends time with, and his social media activity.

Jubel D'Cruz

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We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to editor@indore@fpj.co.in Using email! Send your letters to Free Press, Free Press House, 3/54, Press Complex, AB Road, Indore 452008



The lasting happiness of the human race depends not on power to dominate others but on his mastery over his demonic traits. So, the rub of the matter is that man needs to be reminded in an effective manner that if he does not kill the demons of hate, anger and war with the weapons of love and universal brotherhood, the demons would kill mankind.

The writer is a spiritual educator and popular columnist for publications across India, Nepal and the UK. He can be contacted at nikunjig@gmail.com / www.brahmakumaris.com

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

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Human Intelligence On Keeping AI in Line

Good intent, but regulation still lacks teeth

The second global summit on AI regulation in Seoul earlier this month made progress in supervision of the technology. Tech companies have again reaffirmed their intent to apply basic safeguards as AI develops. In addition, governments now have institutions to observe the emanating risks, and are in a position to demarcate no-go areas. The next step is to harmonise intergovernmental regulation that can keep AI development within pre-approved limits. All this is, however, intent, and 'regulation' lacks teeth. But the global response to AI has made some progress between Bletchley Park in Britain where the first AI safety summit was held and Seoul. Regulation of AI is moving from companies and academics to governments that are acquiring capacity to oversee and check its evolution.

There are two ways to approach AI regulation. The first would be to apply rules to use cases. Thus, develop-



ment of AI in medicine would have to conform to existing and some new regulatory conditions for the health industry. These rules can then be adjusted to fit some other industry, for instance, finance. Governments would collaborate in each of these verticals to come up with a broad set of global rules. A scaffolding, thus, emerges to keep AI within legal limits across a range of its uses. A separate set of rules would also similarly emerge on what AI should *not* be doing, such as its use in warfare.

The second, and much more nettlesome, approach is to control AI's development at source. This would be in response to the risk that AI is able to independently outwit some or all use-case regulation—the Armageddon scenario. The approach to regulation here would be to control AI through computing power, over which tech creators and lawmakers differ. Governments are already prevailing by linking transparency and governance with size. Just as thresholds of ethical behaviour are being imposed on the basis of impact scale of AI deployment. All of these now await being converted into a legal harness to guide AI.

Leave Gaming to the Real Mai-Baap

As across the world, gaming is huge business — and pleasure — in India. The country has around 57 mn active gamers, the second-largest globally after China. Children, youngsters and women form a significant chunk of this vast user base. Its popularity has been enabled by increased broadband penetration, widespread smartphone adoption, improved internet connectivity, a vast population of young people, increased awareness and creation of local gaming content. But this booming sector may be facing headwinds from the proverbial nanny state. According to an ET report, GoI is mulling over imposing time and spending limits on online gamers to tackle 'gaming addiction' among children and young adults.



In 2023, MeitY enacted IT rules that mandate the inclusion of educationists, mental health experts and child rights advocates to protect children from the potential harms of online gaming. The concern is valid, and genuine. But the state has no business in literally playing mai-baap regarding how parents should bring up their children. This includes the state putting the equivalent of a 'child lock' for gaming at homes. We aren't China.

Instead of planning to behave like a nanny state, GoI, at best, could make parents and school administrators more aware of the downsides of 'too much' screentime. Cracking down on candy-loving kids and youngsters is hardly the way to tackle the problem of sugar-rushers. In any case, money for real-money gamers comes from parents, not from the child's pocket. Parents can make informed choices. The state should prioritise enforcing the law — including against law-breaking minors — rather than interfering with families who'd rather have genuine minimum government, maximum governance, not lessons in discipline and habits.



JUST IN JEST

Tired of having to correct your name in docs'n'messages if it's not John/Jane?

Down with Autocratic Anglo Autocorrects!

The horror! The horror! — As the great Joseph Conrad, sorry, Conrad, made a character in his 1899 novella, *The Heart of Darkness*, utter. But instead of existential dread lurking along the Congo River, the modern-day horror is the autocorrect. The message or document, its autocorrect activated, makes a mockery of names if they aren't anglophonic enough on the lines of John or Jane. And riding this culturally hegemonic 'bug' comes the standard sender's excuse, 'Sorry, it wasn't me, it was autocorrect!' No can do with this defence any more, bruv. In Britain, the 'I am not a typo' campaign wants, nay, demands that technology becomes more inclusive, more aware of names beyond the 'Enid Blyton' nomenclature. And, no, Vivekananda is neither 'Vivekamanand' nor 'vindaloo'.

All names are created equal, but software doesn't treat them equally, the bias of coders showing. Even non-anglophones tend to buckle under this 'correctional' tyranny. Sita becomes 'sitar', Václav becomes 'valve'. The campaign's research found that almost 5,500 names given to persons in England and Wales in 2021 alone received the wavy red line treatment courtesy of Microsoft's UK English dictionary. So, non-anglophonic name-holders of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your misnomers. Or send protest emails to Microsoft's Saturday Nutella and Meta's Mark Zookeeper.

India's producing far fewer kids — we need to quickly make the best use of our working-age population



Kiran Karnik

Imagine a country with few children and, hence, few grandparents. That is where nations are headed, and India faster than most.

A March Lancet study indicates a far more rapid decline in India's total fertility rate (TFR) — going down to 1.29 by 2050 — than was assumed in previous studies and projections. Compared to the benchmark of 2.1, below which there is a prospective decrease in the total population, India's TFR is 1.91 (2021).

A UN study predicted a peak population, of 1.7 bn, for India in 2065. Now, it seems certain that the peak will be reached much earlier and at a lower level (around 1.6 bn). By 2100, the population will be down to its level a century earlier: around 1 bn.

A low and decreasing TFR has long been a feature of prosperous countries not only in Europe but also in Japan and Singapore (TFR 1.2), and South Korea (0.82). China is not in the same per-capita income league. Yet, it too has witnessed a steep decline in TFR (1.23), partly due to its earlier one-child policy.

Experience shows that fertility declines tend to be sharp and irreversible, resulting in fewer children and, eventually, fewer working-age people. India's growing bulge in the latter gives us a demographic dividend — a far lower proportion of dependents to working-age people — but will, in a couple of decades, translate into more elders.

As better healthcare results in longevity, the ratio of dependents who need to be economically supported by those in the working-age group will increase further, creating a worsening dependency ratio. Even fewer child births (indicated by a decreasing TFR) will not compensate for this.

New figures have several implications for India:

- ▶ Adverse dependency ratio caused by the 'demographic decline' will be worse — and earlier — than anticipated, making the demographic dividend bigger, but shorter. Higher healthcare costs and pensions may cause a financial crisis, as many developed countries now fear.
- ▶ A lower economic growth, resulting from a stable or decreasing, and ageing

HURRY, POP! While We're Still Young!



Let's get the demographics working

ing, population, as witnessed in many countries. Even China — not yet prosperous, and though there are other factors — is confronting comparatively low growth.

▶ With a per-capita income of \$3,000 (a fourth of China's), India desperately needs high growth for many decades.

▶ So, we need to capitalise vigorously, urgently and fully on the demographic dividend while it lasts. The next few decades present a golden opportunity, which we must grab. This requires immediate skilling to ensure jobs for and productivity of the working-age population.

Having reached this stage of low TFR later than at least a dozen countries gives India the advantage of learning from their experience and leveraging newer technologies. Some steps:

- ▶ Continue the demographic dividend for a longer period through a slower glide path in the declining fertility. This would have to include incentives and an ecosystem that encourages

childbirth.

▶ Reduce the dependency ratio by extending the productive work life of elders, by ensuring good health, reskilling where necessary and productive jobs.

▶ Ensure a truly lower dependency ratio by upskilling women for traditional work (e.g., caregiving) and new livelihoods, especially in WFH mode.

▶ Promote upskilling of the disadvantaged to increase their productivity. Tech can play a role here.

▶ Encourage inward immigration, especially of skilled youngsters and students who can be encouraged to stay on through long-term work-permits. Preference must be given for skills in priority



The global war for talent will soon turn into a competition to attract immigrants. India should build up from now to reach a 2-3% foreign-born population by 2050-60

areas (e.g., AI and robotics). Young immigrants will add to the workforce and, hence, reduce the dependency ratio. Also, the young are more capable of wealth-increasing and job-generating innovations.

▶ Promote automation and use of robots to minimise, in the long run, the need for more workers.

These steps are contrary — even contradictory — to present thinking. But they are essential safeguards against a demographic disaster. At one time, this seemed remote — both as a possibility and in time. Now, it may loom large much earlier, probably from mid-century. If we don't act in time, India could face social and economic stagnation.

Many countries with low TFR are taking steps to incentivise childbirth, with little success, to accelerate automation. China has moved from one-child to two, to three, as the norm. Russia has called on women to have more children 'as a national duty'. Singapore and South Korea are offering cash incentives.

China is also rapidly automating. Last year, 50% of new robots installed globally went into China's factories.

▶ Inviting immigrants is far more complex. But even a cursory look at figures for Britain and the US is educative. In both, about 15% of the population is foreign-born. Singapore has long offered work visas and permanent residency to highly-skilled immigrants. Even traditionally cloistered Japan is now beginning to encourage immigration.

The now-nascent global war for talent will soon transform into a competition to attract immigrants. India, too, should begin to build up from now to reach at least 2-3% as the proportion of foreign-born population by 2050 or 2060 (i.e., about 30-50 mn).

The first step in this transformation of population policy must be research studies, which define an optimum population size and its age composition a few decades from now. This will be a dynamic figure, changing with time and assumptions about health/fertility, economic factors, immigration and technology.

Debate and dialogue on this must be followed by an action plan as part of a new national population policy. These are essential steps to ensuring fast and continuing economic growth, and a vibrant and even more diverse society. If these proactive steps are not taken, ambitions of being a developed country will remain a pipe dream.

The writer is author of *Decisive Decade: India 2030*, *Gazelle* or *Hippo*



THE SPEAKING TREE

Secret Path To Serenity

DAAJI

Happiness, in its purest form, is not a fleeting emotion dependent on external circumstances but an enduring state of being that stems from inner harmony. True happiness is not found in the fulfilment of desires but in liberation from them.

This doesn't mean one should not have aspirations. Our passions, goals, aspirations and the fulfilment of those are what make us human. Nevertheless, attaching our happiness to the fulfilment of our desires is detrimental to our progress and personal transformation.

The 'yielding heart' is powerful for attracting grace and joy. By cultivating an open and receptive heart, we create a fertile ground for happiness to flourish.

Shri Ram Chandra of Shah-jahanpur used to say that the happiest individuals are those who can maintain their happiness under all circumstances. This resilience comes from a deep-rooted understanding that happiness is not contingent upon external factors but is an intrinsic quality that can be cultivated from within.

By embracing a state of contentment and letting go of our excessive attachments and expectations, we liberate ourselves from the cycle of desire. This leads to a profound inner peace and a sense of boundless bliss that surpasses fleeting pleasures. The secret to finding the path of everlasting happiness is to develop a yielding heart that has a cheerful disposition of accepting nature's blessings.

Chat Room

Eat the Poor, Starve the Rich

Apropos 'Don't Eat the Rich, It'll Hurt the Rest' by Govind Bhattacharjee (May 29), this is a convenient argument forwarded to preserve the pro-rich policies and programmes. In fact, the reality is the other way around. Eating the share of the underprivileged will hurt the rich in the long term. The present trend of abnormal economic inequality and growing unemployment in the background of untamed inflation is like a volcano ready to erupt. So, an additional nominal tax on the wealthy may not change the life of the poor, but is a step in the right direction.

A GRAJMOHAN

Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

Advertise to Our Señor Citizens

This refers to 'Silver Linings Playbook' by Shannon Tellis (Brand Equity, May 29-Jun 4). Indian homes treat senior citizens as grandchildren's scouts to school, post office and bank errand-runners, etc. Of course, there are exceptions. Nonetheless, the cul-



perts are the brands that segment class consumerism. Big brands position themselves by the vanity of a certain class. Rather, these brands ought to universalise their products by focusing on 'frequency value' instead of 'order value'. Such an approach will augment life styles and quality of life, leading to the creation of a brand new Indian.

SULTAN AKHTAR PATEL

By email

Physics Wallah Politician

Apropos 'Why NDA's Seat Tally Relies On 48 Lok Sabha Seats in Maharashtra' by Krishna Kumar (May 29), politicians, like free electrons, are not bound to a nucleus and move around freely, more so during elections. And, like free electrons move from one element to another, politicians move from one party to the other depending upon the force applied (read: incentives) by outside forces. Most of them remain in the outer orbit, and some lucky ones land in Rajya Sabha and are dormant for 5 years till it's time to move freely again. To block this free movement, the politician leaving a party should resign and re-contest for the party she wants to join, so that voters are not cheated.

RAHUL KUMAR

By email

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com

ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In a land where gods run the show,
Every politician claims to glow.
With divine intervention,
And promises ascension,
Their godliness sure steals the show!

...

Global Job Market

Global unemployment is set to fall slightly this year. ILO expects a 4.9% rate for 2024, after originally forecasting unemployment would rise to 5.2% from 5% in 2023. An unemployment rate of 4.9% means that 183 million persons are unemployed. As per another, more broader measure of labour underutilisation, jobs gap* for 2024 is estimated higher at 402 million...

Labour underutilisation indicators, World (millions)

YEAR	JOBS GAP	UNEMPLOYED
2005	413	188
2015	433	202
2019	422	194
2020	482	227
2021	453	212
2022	407	190
2023	399	183
2024*	402	183

*Unemployed (meet 2 technical criteria: available at short notice & actively searching for work) + potential labour force (meet one criteria, but not both) + willing non-jobseekers (meet neither criterion but are willing to work); *Projection Source: AFP, ILO

Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Don't block telemarketers; we too need someone to scream at.

Overheating Electricity



Elkano Getaria, Spain

Located in the sleepy fishing town of Getaria in Spain's Basque region, Elkano, a Michelin-starred restaurant, has become one of the hardest eateries to book in the world. This is no surprise, as Elkano, situated by the Bay of Biscay, has set very high standards for grilling. Elkano had a humble beginning when Pedro Arregui, a creative cook, transformed his mother's grocery store into a bar. Next to it, he installed a small street-side grill. One day, a fisherman brought him a huge broad-bodied European flatfish called turbot, which Arregui roasted with the skin. Soon, Arregui's grilling innovations became popular and Elkano was born. Elkano is all

about seafood. It is about using the freshest seafood and cooking without unnecessary garnishes. You could try Kokotxas, a traditional Basque fish stew cooked in three ways. The signature dish is the grilled whole turbot. It's so perfectly cooled that it comes off the bone easily. The taste is buttery yet smoky, thanks to the open-fire cooking. Seafood cooking is all about perfect timing, and chefs' control over the grilling process must be total. Equally is the choice of ingredients. Elkano has mastered both these techniques brilliantly.



an immediately accessible short-term measure to improve non-solar supplies eludes consumers.

Thermal capacity includes gas-fired plants. These account for a significant 6% of the country's installed capacity and record poor sales since inexpensive domestic gas supply is limited, while imports are expensive. Utilities are either formally or informally dissuaded from purchasing expensive electricity to keep down their power purchaser costs. In effect, the state-level regulatory play supports artificially low tariffs.

Furthermore, in several cases where power deals have been struck, utilities drag their feet over the fuel price. These disputes have landed up at the central regulator's doorstep who sets a normative price that leaves the producer dissatisfied. This explains the generator's reluctance to sell in a deficit market.

Finally, in several cases, a scrutiny of the 'peak' demand to utilities' power purchase contracts reveals poor mapping of 'real-time' demand and consequent purchase, which results in wasted resources.

Over the last two years, wielding the threat of switching off access to interstate transmission systems, the key to power supplies, GoI successfully nudged utilities to settle their ₹1.35 lakh cr dues owed to generation companies. Also, it's supporting ongoing reform measures in utilities — investments to support supply loss reduction and metering to improve collections and, thereby, revenues.

Such levers need to be directed towards reforming state regulators that have fallen prey to political capture. Given the rising impact of climate change, this is imperative. Utilities need to be nudged to undertake efficient resource adequacy planning. In the short term, higher tariffs to mitigate peaking shortages need to be socialised in India, in effect recognising the true cost of intermittent supplies.

Kumar is former secretary, power ministry, GoI, and Chandramouli writes on energy and sustainability



Through the power sector darkly

Alok Kumar & Balaji Chandramouli

With temperatures reaching record levels in many parts of India, GoI has instructed idling power plants to crank up operations to cope with the impending increase in electricity demand. While this indicates that power generators are not receiving remunerative prices despite high demand, the push has also not resulted in utilities purchasing enough power, as evidenced by shortages.

A glimpse of the countrywide supply situation against generation capacity addition offers insight into possible solutions. This can be broadly broken into two periods: 2011-16, and thereafter. The scenario in 2010-11 was somewhat like this:

- ▶ Annual countrywide energy shortfall was as high as 8.5%, while peak shortfall was at 9.8%.
- ▶ During 2015-16, this was 2.1% and 3.2% for energy and peak shortfall, respectively, largely on the back of thermal capacity addition, which was as high as close to three-quarters of addition between 2010 and 2015.

- ▶ Solar power accounted for 2%, wind 9% of installed capacity. The big green energy contributor was hydropower, at 14%.
- ▶ Tables turned after 2011.
- ▶ Thermal addition waned, adding a modest 24% during 2016-23.
- ▶ Solar capacity rose to 54% (and continues to rise) and wind registered 14% increase, while hydel capacity addition was at a little less than 4%.
- ▶ Solar capacity increased from 2% in 2016 to 16% in 2023, while that of wind power rose marginally from around 9% to a little over 10%.

This rise of RE reflected adversely on the supply situation. During 2023, peak

Seed crisis is rooted in governments' apathy

THIS election season, unusual serpentine queues are being witnessed all over the country. They are being formed by farmers, braving scorching temperatures, not to cast votes but to purchase cotton and other seeds across the country. Forecast of a good monsoon has farmers scrambling to kick off sowing operations. Cops are being called in, to control the surging crowds.

Ironically, the acute seeds shortage finds no takers in the bitterest elections to Lok Sabha, where politicians pick up everything under the sun to throw at their rivals. It has been the most acrimonious election the country has ever witnessed, heavily peppered with jibes and insults by both the opposition and the ruling fronts. One stark issue that is conspicuously absent in the vicious

onslaught by the opposition has been farmers' plight in the country. The Modi government, too, had little to boast of about its contributions to the welfare of the farming community. Incidentally, we saw farmers' protests rage during the Modi regime over the contentious laws it proposed.

Amidst this disquieting scenario comes a spell, rather shower, of good news that there will be above-normal monsoon season this year. The monsoon season, so crucial for the economy, provides nearly 70 per cent of the rainfall that the country receives in a year. A good spell is needed not only to irrigate crops and replenish reservoirs and aquifers, but also provide drinking water to towns and cities.

Sadly, last year the monsoon rain-

fall hit a five-year low, marking the lowest since 2018 due to El Nino, a weather condition associated with weaker monsoon winds, dry weather, and harsher summers in India. This deprived irrigation for almost half of the farmland, sparking a sustained surge in the food inflation. August 2023 was the driest month in over a century, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

Consequently, prices of food items kept soaring in the country. Worried about the political fallout in the General Elections, the government clamped restrictions on rice exports. Such an action by the world's largest rice provider sent global prices hitting the roof. The country also prohibited onion exports for over six months, easing the ban only in respect of a few coun-

tries. It also imposed curbs on sugar exports. It also had to permit duty-free imports of pulses.

The Central government dithered while cotton seed producing states, such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana, Rajasthan, saw reduced acreage. Experts had timely warned that India could be staring at a shortage of cotton seeds by as much as 40 per cent in 2024 season. Precipitating the situation, there were no surplus stocks either. The farmers are now paying for the governments' apathy.

Isn't the government unwittingly allowing a seed shortage to turn India into a food insecure nation? Even a common man understands that there is a need for an effective plan for the planting season. The

government should have gone for import of seeds to replenish the dwindling stock, opine the experts. Otherwise, how else can India see a good harvest despite a bountiful monsoon? Whichever way is feasible, the most crucial task on the government hands is to ensure "FARMERS GET THE SEEDS" - in time and at subsidy in view of their losses due to poor monsoon last year. In Karnataka, the cost of sowing seeds has nearly doubled this year. Another worry that is troubling the hapless farmers is flood of fake seeds in the market. The loss of a crop despite good rainfall is indescribable for the poor farmers. The governments must at once ramp up quality controls, lab tests, seed certification and raids on unscrupulous traders. The time is running out.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

No end in sight to Gaza genocide

ISRAEL continues its strikes targeting Rafah and other places like Al-Mawasi in Gaza despite widespread international condemnation of the strike on a tent camp in Rafah and the acknowledgement of it as a 'tragic mistake' by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. It carries out its strikes relentlessly in areas designated as 'safe zones' and 'humanitarian spaces' by the IDF. The genocidal war in Gaza is based on the principle that 'might is right'. The Palestinians are left with no option but to meekly bear the brunt of Israel's might. Still the Biden administration holds the view that Israel's attacks have not crossed the red line and do not warrant the denial of 'aid' in dollars and munitions.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, TN

IT'S good that three more European countries, Norway, Ireland and Spain have recognised Palestine as a sovereign state. It will serve the Palestine cause at its most difficult times and build pressure on adamant Israel, which is crossing all legal, ethical and humanitarian limits in its war against Hamas. The decades-long efforts of Palestine with the support of majority members of UN couldn't fructify in getting UN membership for that country only due to relentless opposition of a single country that is USA. The growing support from world countries should help the war torn Palestine to find its voice strengthened.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

Mani Shankar yet again kicks up row

MANI Shankar Aiyar, a senior Congress leader, triggered a fresh controversy after he referred to the 1962 Indo-China war as an "alleged Chinese invasion". As a purported video of an event at the Foreign Correspondents Club on Tuesday, where Mani Shankar Aiyar made the statement, started circulating on social media, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh pointed out that his party colleague had subsequently apologised "unreservedly" for using the term "alleged invasion" "mistakenly", and that the party distances itself from the "original phraseology. Mani Shankar Aiyar, the man of controversies, opened up pandora box on the eve of election results.

Calicut Krishnan Ramani, Chennai

SRH made a meek surrender

"SRH, clear the last hurdle next time" (Edit, May 29) depicts great and poor plays displayed by this team in the total Indian Premier League tournament. Ultimately, SRH has disappointed the Telugu audience specifically with its very meek performance in the final match against Kolkata Knight Riders. Travis Head's consecutive ducks is unpardonable. Abhishek Sharma and others also lost control of their bats. We are least bothered how best they are in certain matches. In a crucial one, they most miserably faltered to rise to the occasion. Final success matters more than what hurdles come on the way. SRH made a self goal and lost 2024 IPL trophy.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

No takers for 'Jumlas' by Modi & co

WE the people of India are fed up and had enough of "jumlas". Modi & co completed 10 years in office and could not prosecute a single opposition leader till date, but for filing 'cases'!.. The NDA Sarkar could not even get Vijay Malaya, Neeraj Modi, Lalit Modi, Mehjl Choksi and the like extradited to India from their foreign hideouts. Several tainted leaders of opposition parties have defected to BJP and are sitting pretty as there is no fear of CBI or ED raids, etc. Now after 10 years in office, Modi at the flag end of poll campaign vows to get back money looted by opposition leaders. I am reminded of the "jumla" dated back to 2014, about crediting Rs15 lakh into the bank accounts of all Indians after getting back the money stashed in Swiss banks and other black money havens. In 2016 Modiji went on to ask the people to hang him if he fails to bring back black money. I want to tell Modiji that we are not ready to be fooled once again on this score.

Govardhana Myneedu, Vijayawada

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

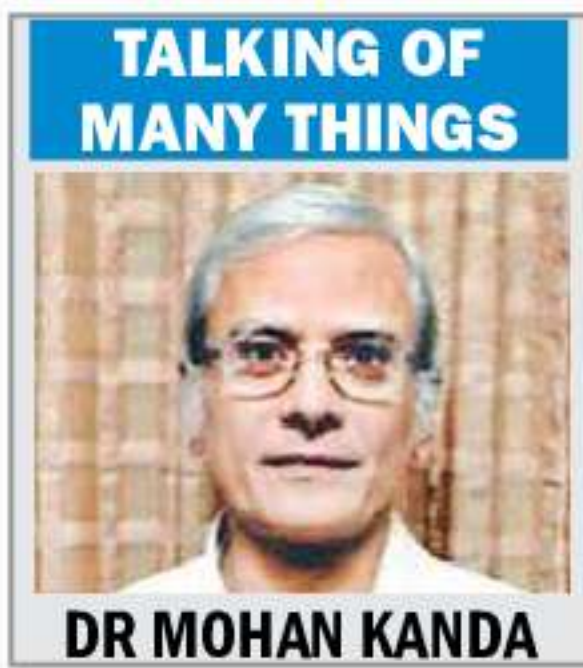
School union sends out warning letter on children's use of social media

BENGALURU: Recently, school children are more active on social media. This is putting them in danger. In this context, the Private Schools Union has sent a warning message to the parents. Children are increasingly engaging themselves in social networking sites, which can lead to danger. Therefore, in the letter it is written to take care of the children.

Children are becoming obsessed with social status. Misuse of technology by students. Children's use of social media has increased. They are secretly active on different social networking sites, using different names without the knowledge of their parents. Children are showing hidden connection, affection, more interest with other classmates. "There has been an increase in swearing, hatred and insults on social media, and the number of minor students is increasing. Class 5-6 students are involved in on-line businesses, online games, online gambling, etc. They are misusing their Parents mobile phones without their knowledge. Such cases have come to light in many educational institutions. So be careful about the children," the private school union wrote in a letter.

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

Imagination: The true magic carpet



TALKING OF MANY THINGS
DR MOHAN KANDA

THE world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is out of focus" - Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Imagination is the least understood, and the most neglected, faculty while being, at the same time, the most important. It is the faculty of forming new images, or concepts, of external objects, not perceptible to the senses. Imagination is our entire existence, influencing all that we think about, and create, leading to elaborate theories, grand dreams, and exciting inventions, from academia to engineering and the arts. A unique gift in other words, which Joseph Joubert, the French moralist and essayist, called the 'eye of the soul'.

The world in which we live today would not be what it is, but for the spectacular advances, and understanding of nature, provided by the path-breaking contributions of great philosopher-scientists such as Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. Both of them possessed imagination in abundant measure, as well as the rare ability to discover new, and exciting phenomena in nature.

Likewise, in more recent times, extraordinarily, gifted persons such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, used their imagi-

nation, envisaging how personal computers can change the world, the way we are, how we could educate our children and entertain ourselves.

Einstein said of himself, "I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."

In saying so, he was talking about his ability to form a picture, in his mind, of what was likely to happen in various physical circumstances, yet to be tested. An ability that led to what is known as 'gedanken experiments' or 'thought - experiments', a concept that was to result in several mind-blowing discoveries, including the effect of gravitation on light, time-dilation, or the slowing down of time at great speeds, and the recent discovery of gravitational waves.

Einstein instinctively believed that he knew the result of an experiment even before it was conducted, feeling certain that he was right, without knowing the reason. He intuitively relied more on imagination, than knowledge. A fertile imagination was the quality that inspired most of the works of the great Shakespeare. In fact, the well-known English writer, Samuel Johnson, famously said, of him, "Each change of many-coloured life he drew. Exhausted worlds, and then imagin'd new." And, then, there was the intensely controversial maverick pugilist, Muhammad Ali, who said, "the man who has no imagination has no wings."

From Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, through Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Beethoven, and Shakespeare, to



People generally believe that imagination is the exclusive possession of artists, poets, and dreamers, although it plays a significant role in many other fields. For instance, it plays a vital part in the process of education. Children endowed with robust imagination can become confident writers, given the support and encouragement of teachers, who can help them come up with innovative ideas about the world around them, and the people in it

Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Bill Gates, the history of mankind is replete with instances when the thought processes of individuals changed its course dramatically. As did those of Hitler's or Mussolini's, though in a negative sense.

People generally believe that imagination is the exclusive possession of artists, poets, and dreamers, although it plays a significant role in many other fields. For instance, it plays a vital part in the process of education. Children endowed with robust imagination can become confident writers, given the support and encouragement of teachers, who can help them come up with innovative ideas about the world around them, and the people in it. Likewise, imagination is a faculty of great importance to creative writers, as it to acts as a medium for

tapping into one's inner world, to create unique and compelling stories that capture the readers' attention.

Imaginary numbers play an extraordinarily important role in the field of mathematics. The number i, the square root of -1, is not a real number, as it cannot be pinpointed on the line that represents real numbers. Still, it is real, in the sense that it exists and has great value in mathematics. Numbers of the type a+ib are of significant use in many disciplines such as quantum mechanics which describes the micro cosmic or subatomic world.

Scientific pursuits demand a somewhat cold, and austere, rigour. In contrast, the arts appeal to the aesthetic sense. Interestingly, both have attracted distinguished and eminent subscribers with dramatically divergent views. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, for

example, described science as something which exercises the reason and art as that which appeals to the imagination. The celebrated British poet, William Blake, on the other hand, saw everything in the abstract. He, in fact, took on legendary figures of his times, including "The Unholy Trinity" (as he called them), of Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, and John Locke, who, he felt, were more obsessed with reason, at the expense of all else, famously saying "art is the tree of life, science is the tree of death".

It is the faculty of imagination that has led to the stipulation of imaginary lines called parallels or latitudes that divide Earth. Running from east to west, they measure the distance of a given point north or south. The equator is the most well-known of them, dividing the earth into the northern and southern hemispheres. Likewise, longitudes are imaginary lines which run north to south, and measure the distance, east or west. The Prime Meridian is an arbitrary line passing through the telescope at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich England. It was chosen by the International Meridian Conference in Washington in 1884, and has a longitude of 0°, dividing Earth into eastern and western hemispheres. As an ardent student of geography in my school days, I felt a thrill pass through me, as I stood straddling the Prime Meridian, during a recent visit to England.

An expression that is very popular is to 'catch the imagination' of someone or to make that person very interested or excited. Likewise, figments of

one's imagination stands for a product of the mind, which not only does not exist, but is not likely to be real.

According to the Upanishads, parts of the Vedas in Hindu religion, the entire world is Mithya or illusory and having no reality whatsoever. All life, in a manner of speaking, lies in the realm of illusion.

Imagination, indeed, is a powerful faculty. A thoroughly happy person, watching a sordid movie depicting the travails of a poor person, can, quite literally, inflict upon himself the suffering the poor person is going through. And a person, in abject misery, can merely shut his eyes, and imagine himself enjoying the utmost luxury. As the great lyricist Shailendra says, in the immortal song, "Mera Joota Hai Japani", enacted in the most appealing manner by the legendary Raj Kapoor, in yesteryear's blockbuster Hindi movie Shree 420.

"Honge Raaje Rajkanwar Hum Bigde Dil Shehzade Hum Singhasan Par Ja Baithen Jab Jab Karen Iraade" A lighthearted snippet, to end this piece.

Several weeks after a young man had been hired, he was called into the personnel manager's office. "What is the meaning of this?" the manager asked. "When you applied for the job, you told us you had 5 years' experience. Now we discover this is the first job you've ever had" "Well," the young man said, "in your ad you said you wanted somebody with imagination."

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

LESSONS FOR LIFE FROM IPL 2024

The Indian Premier League is more than just a T20 cricket tournament.

NIDARSHANA SHARMA

FOR starters, it's entertaining. But more importantly, it's cricket's money-making machine. From players to team owners, street vendors to pub owners, commentators to cricketing YouTubers - this is a lip-smacking treat.

In this season, we saw records being shattered like homes in Palestine. Champion team Mumbai Indians looked like Baahubali's XI but played like Katappa's sword, killing hopes of a sixth win.

On the other end, defending champions CSK's age-old winning formula of 'spin choke' was tossed aside for a little Mumbai masala (the duo of Deshpande and Thakur). The result? A bland season with a last-minute loss to RCB and bye-bye to playoffs for only the third time in 14 editions. But, as far as I'm concerned, this IPL has also imparted some wisdom. Here are my five lessons!

1. You can't fail if you keep trying
If there's anything I've learned from Riyan Parag's dominating batting this sea-



son it's this: one can never fail if they never give up. After a couple of abysmal seasons, the youngster had become the poster child for trolls, but he let nothing deter him and came back with a bang this season.

All he had to do was back himself and try again. The team was already doing it. They refused to let him fail and he has paid them back handsomely. Blue jersey calling them?

2. You can do ANYTHING!
In 2022, star left-handed wicket-keeper, Rishabh Pant was in a car crash that put him out of cricket for over a year. The cricketing circuit

was plunged into silence and shock and questions about Pant's fitness for a demanding career like cricket quietly did the rounds.

But, with a strike rate of over 150 and almost 500 runs under his belt, Pant showed the world that when you want to break mountains, nobody can stop you.

Not only did he play beautifully, but he also almost took his side to the playoffs and booked himself a spot in the T20 World Cup squad.

3. You're never too old to learn
Virat Kohli is the GOAT for a reason! He's been playing cricket like he's a decade younger than his 35 years this IPL. After his team

One man stuck to his guns and bowled like a dream. Jasprit Bumrah showed us that if you are focused and don't let the circumstances get to you, you can shine! Bumrah, who was out injured for the T20 World Cup in 2022 was trolled incessantly and has let his bowling do the talking. A laser-sharp focus and a fire in his belly have made Bumrah the lethal and shrewd bowler that he is. He's going to be a crucial factor if India is to get anywhere close to its second WC

was practically knocked out of the tournament and his strike rate came under harsh criticism by a certain "great" of the game, the man dug deep inside his soul and displayed a new batting style that was sweet redemption and took RCB to the coveted playoffs.

The King has shown us once again that there is always room to grow, to learn and to reinvent. Here's hoping his blistering form continues well into the T20 World Cup and gives India thunderous starts.

4. Faith is powerful!
Another lesson from the RCB camp. Have faith. That's what

the RCB fans have lived by all these years. They've held on and they've backed their heroes (who have continued to change, except the Great One).

Although they crashed out after the eliminator, they won hearts everywhere with their winning streak, their camaraderie and fierce attitude on the field.

Ee saala, the cup didn't come home, but the fans will come back next year, their hearts bursting with belief. One season, their faith will certainly be rewarded.

5. A focused mind is your most-prized asset
Who would have thought that champion side MI,

which looked dangerous on paper would crumple like a piece of paper? If anything, this was a forgettable season which was marred by team changes, tactical failures and a lack of match-winning performances for the five-time champion side.

But, one man stuck to his guns and bowled like a dream. Jasprit Bumrah showed us that if you are focused and don't let the circumstances get to you, you can shine!

Bumrah, who was out injured for the T20 World Cup in 2022 was trolled incessantly and has let his bowling do the talking. A laser-sharp focus and a fire in his belly have made Bumrah the lethal and shrewd bowler that he is. He's going to be a crucial factor if India is to get anywhere close to its second WC.

What an IPL it has been. A terrific battling display by bottom-placed SRH and a win from the thus middling KKR have proven that this is one of the most action-packed and entertaining sporting leagues in the world and has a bright future ahead!

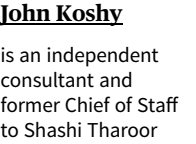


The National Disaster Management Authority had recommended to the 13th Finance Commission, an allocation of ₹7,000 crore to revamp India's fire and emergency services. But the Commission sought an allocation of almost ₹90,000 crore at the municipality level, recognising the need for a tailor-made revamping and restructuring of fire and emergency preparedness. A 2019 Home Ministry response to the Rajya Sabha noted that India had only 3,377 fire stations, when a 2012 national report on fire hazards and risk analysis sought more than double that number. The staff shortage is even more appalling. The entire country had only about 55,000 fire servicemen in 2019, when the requirement was about 5,60,000 seven years earlier. The Centre belatedly set aside ₹5,000 crore last July asking States to cough up another ₹1,400 crore to modernise emergency services. This follows the 15th Finance Commission's advice to set aside 12.5% of all allocations towards the National/State Disaster Response Funds. With rising heatwaves and extreme weather events nationwide, it is clear that a synchronisation of the 2016 NBC and the Energy Conservation Building Code is required to attempt a holistic approach to address fires, as standards for construction material, electrical wiring, air-conditioning, and a whole range of cooling materials have to be revamped. More importantly, India's polity, bureaucracy, policymakers and entrepreneurs must urgently address this insidious threat.

Trump is facing a legal challenge, but his political fortunes are on a parallel track

Even if Mr. Trump is found guilty on any of the charges, he would leave the courthouse a free man as he has been on bail throughout the case thus far. He would seek to remain free at least until he appeals to the Appellate Division in Manhattan, and possibly faces the Court of Appeals. While each charge in the case carries a potential maximum sentence of four years, if there is a sentencing hearing, then the judge may take several factors into account, including Mr Trump's age of 77 years, the lack of a previous conviction and the non-violent nature of the alleged crimes. Even if Mr. Trump successfully evades the full force of the law in the hush-money case, he faces three other felony indictments, including in federal and state cases relating to interference in the 2020 election, and his alleged role in the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, as well as allegations that he mishandled classified documents that were found at his residence in Mar-a-Lago, Florida, after he had demitted office. While these cases are stuck in the appeals process and would be unlikely to reach trial this year, it is safe to say that no matter what the outcome of the jury's deliberations is in the New York case, the political climate will only get further vitiated and polarised as the country lurches forward to the November 5 presidential election.

The right sees different dangers in liberalism, particularly its emphasis on individual freedom. Tagore was an authentically Indian liberal voice of freedom, insisting that every individual be free to pursue his destiny: "Give me the strength never to...bend my knees before insolent might," he prayed in *Gitanjali*. But in today's India, insolent might commands the stage. The right garbs itself in the social values that emphasise the needs of the individual over the ideals of



If there was ever a time to articulate a reformed and expanded idea of Indian liberalism, it is now

But if there was ever a time for us to articulate a reformed and expanded idea of Indian liberalism, it is now. The current legitimisation of illiberal alternatives and the erosion of trust in egalitarian democracy, the surrender of individual liberties to the hands of a ruling dispensation that has consistently exceeded its constitutional powers, the rampant undermining of institutions that were meant to check executive overreach, and the mainstreaming of bigoted and chauvinistic narratives that seek to 'otherize' entire communities, all point to an urgent need to offer a reimagined idea of liberalism to counter the systemic rot that plagues our democratic system.

First, evangelists for syncretic liberalism will need to engage with the ideas of tradition and identity in a more comprehensive and sustained manner. These are fundamental emotional and cultural concerns that animate the functioning of individuals and communities in our country but

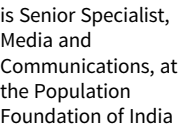
Third, for a more democratised and harmonious version of liberalism to succeed, both political reform and a revival of representative institutions will be needed. The centralisation of power in an overweening state, the lack of trust that individual citizens have in our institutions, their inadequate representation in decision-making forums, and the overreach of government through its surveillance of, and interference in, the daily lives of citizens, have all contributed to an overall erosion of public confidence in Indian democracy that must be rectified.

Indian liberalism is in need of reform and revival. The time to start the process is now.

Data and socio-economic development

Interpreting population data within the context of socio-economic development is crucial. The number of children a family chooses to have is influenced more by socio-economic factors such as education and economic conditions than by religion. Communities with better access to education, health care, and economic opportunities tend to have lower fertility rates.

A high population growth rate does not indicate that people are necessarily doing well. It often highlights the shortcomings in levels of human development. The higher growth rate of India's Muslim population compared to the Hindu population is a result of the Muslim



The working paper put out by the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister makes a flawed assertion about the growth in the Muslim population

The third way is what the EAC-PM study has done, namely, highlight the rate of change in

This is only to be expected in a statistical sense, given that in 1950, the proportion of Hindus (84.7%) was relatively large compared to the Muslims (9.8%). Examining the rate of change in the shares of other religious communities further underscores the misleading nature of these figures. For instance, the rate of change in share shows an increase of 1519.6% for Buddhists, and 49.2% for Sikhs. This does not imply that Buddhists and Sikhs are conspiring towards re-shaping India's demographic profile. Similarly, the decline in the rate of change for Parsis' share, by 86.7%, does not mean they have been specifically targeted and persecuted in society. These numbers can be misinterpreted easily without proper context.

The delayed figures of the next Census, when they finally come out, will ultimately confirm these trends.

At Kanniyakumari
Meditation seems to be the last straw of hold. It is not a surprise that the top leader has decided to meditate in Kanniyakumari in the last phase of the general election (Inside pages, May 29). This is definitely an indirect way of electioneering, which, we are sure, will go deliberately

unnoticed by the body overseeing the election. This body has anyway amply exhibited its partisan attitude in favour of the ruling dispensation. People have woken up to the reality now and are no longer ready to buy such gimmicks.

Tharcius S. Fernando,
Chennai

Progressive move
Teaching English in government schools is accepting an absolutely required need, and the decision by Karnataka is welcome ("Students of classes 1 to 10 in government and aided schools to have spoken English classes", May 29). The lack of resources in

government-aided schools to facilitate the learning of English language skills persuades many parents to admit their children in private schools which are expensive. Technology is creating incredible opportunities and an abundance of prospects as almost all the gadgets and inventions are for those

who understand English. English promises upward mobility and jobs.

H.N. Ramakrishna,
Bengaluru

The spirit and body
One of the greatest ever tennis stars to grace the game, Rafael Nadal, was a pale shadow of his once formidable self. In Nadal's

case the spirit is more than willing, but with age catching up, the quicksilver reflexes no longer seem to work. Will Nadal follow Roger Federer?

C.V. Aravind,
Bengaluru

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

Open access is crucial for self-reliance in science

A recent editorial piece in *Nature* lauded India's ascent towards becoming a scientific juggernaut, paralleling its burgeoning economic clout. The Indian science ecosystem is indeed on an impressive trajectory, now ranking third globally in research output, and eleventh in quality, according to the *Nature Index*. However, 'ease of doing science' that can lead to great discoveries and innovation hinges on robust infrastructure and resources – a glaring shortfall in India's research landscape.

From 2014 to 2021, the number of universities in India rose from 760 to 1,113. Yet, many lack essential resources such as instrumental access and sophisticated labs, not to mention access to the literature that underpins research. There has been a pioneering initiative, I-STEM, to bridge this gap by cataloguing all publicly funded research facilities nationwide and making them available to researchers based on need. This demand-supply mapping aims to democratise the availability of advanced research infrastructure.

Similarly, the call for 'One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS)' proposes a centralised model of subscription to scientific journals, making them universally available to all publicly funded institutions. It is costly to get access to these commercial journals. It is estimated that institutions in India annually spend ₹1,500 crore to access journals and databases. But the fruits of this expenditure are reaped by only the top few institutes. What of the rest? ONOS negotiation by the government is currently underway with the five major commercial publishers who dominate the market.

The optimal solution?

But is ONOS the optimal solution for facilitating access to scientific literature? When it was conceptualised around 2019, a significant portion of scholarly articles was behind paywalls. Now,



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With the evolving landscape of academic publishing, investing in an all-encompassing subscription model is not prudent

a much larger fraction of articles is available via Open Access (OA), which means that articles are available freely for everyone online. An analysis of publications indexed in the Web of Science shows that the fraction of OA publications globally increased from 38% in 2018 to 50% in 2022. This shift raises a query about the necessity and efficiency of paying for content that is increasingly available for free. Currently, there is a strong push for OA by the U.S. and European Union. The U.S. released its updated OA policy in 2023 that mandates immediate open accessibility of all publicly funded research articles by 2025. Similarly, major philanthropic funding sources such as the Wellcome Trust have mandated OA to the research they fund.

Considering this trend, it is reasonable to argue that we should be paying less than before. The oligopolistic academic publishing market, dominated by a handful of powerful publishers in the global north, allows these publishers to set stringent terms, making any negotiation on ONOS a challenge. The entrenched reputation and authority of these publishers also stymie any discussion of alternatives.

In any other government procurement, the use of public funds is stringently regulated to ensure maximum cost efficiency and benefit. Why, then, should the procurement of academic journals be any different? If significant portions of research are already accessible without cost, the rationale for a unified, costly subscription becomes less compelling. It is also important to note that ONOS will not help make Indian research globally accessible; rather, it primarily facilitates access for Indian researchers to journals owned by big publishing oligarchs.

Further, even if one pays and subscribes to the journal, there is no guarantee of continued access. Today, most academic journals are only digitally available. Most articles have a digital object

identifier (DOI), but DOI does not ensure long-term preservation. A recent study highlights that "approximately 28% of academic journal articles with DOIs appear entirely unpreserved." This finding suggests that millions of research papers risk vanishing from the Internet. For example, over 17,000 research papers from a chemistry journal, distributed by Elsevier globally, except in Japan, disappeared when the journal was discontinued in December 2023.

Green Open Access

Considering commercial publishers have not taken up the responsibility of long-term availability of the content they profit from, it is only logical that every article authored by Indian researchers and funded by taxpayer money should be archived in publicly funded OA repositories. This practice exemplifies what we refer to as Green Open Access. This allows authors to deposit a version of their work in a university repository, making it freely accessible to everyone globally. Indian funding agencies have mandated green OA for a long time, but this has never been enforced. However, the recent troubles should catalyse a stronger push for green OA.

Major publishers such as Elsevier (Netherlands), Thomson Reuters (Canada), Taylor Francis (U.K.), Springer Nature (Germany), and Wiley and SAGE (U.S.) have headquarters in the global north. They are extremely profitable enterprises. Much of this profit is derived from the unpaid labour provided by researchers in the form of peer reviews and editorial works. To become *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant), India needs to make its own journal system better, with no burden of payment to authors or readers. Further, with its capabilities in digital technology, India should also become a pioneer for the global south by creating and sharing digital public infrastructure for low-cost, high-quality scientific publishing.

The BJP cannot bank on 'asmita' alone

It has not campaigned on key issues and has also left brand Naveen unscathed

STATE OF PLAY

Subhankar Nayak

Odisha is voting for both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. If elected to power in the State Assembly for the sixth consecutive term, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik will create history. The fight is primarily between the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main Opposition party in the State. The Congress stands at a distant third.

In this election, neither communalisation nor developmental promises drive the Opposition's campaign, particularly the BJP's campaign, against the BJD government; instead, it is the issue of Odia 'asmita' (self-pride). A bureau-crut-turned politician, V.K. Pandian, the most trusted aide of Mr. Patnaik, has been at the receiving end. Mr. Pandian, who hails from Tamil Nadu, was an IAS officer and rose to become an all-powerful star campaigner for the party, second only to the Chief Minister.

Before asmita became the core election issue, the bonhomie between the BJD and the BJP was well-known. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed Mr. Patnaik as a "dear friend" at a public meeting not too long ago. Both the parties were ready to enter into a pre-poll alliance, but for some reason this did not materialise. This led to a direct BJD versus BJP showdown in the State.

Odisha was the first State to be formed on the basis of language. Its unique identity derives from a rich cultural heritage and a significant historical legacy. As per the BJP's narrative, this identity is under at-



tack and the Odia people's self pride will be further dented if they let the BJD govern the State again, as the reins will be in the hands of a non-Odia, namely, Mr. Pandian.

The BJP's electioneering in Odisha has appeared confused. The party aims to topple a two decade-old government, yet Home Minister Amit Shah has been asserting at rallies that the BJP doesn't have much of an issue with Mr. Patnaik, but only with "the officer from outside". Integrating the Ram Mandir discussion into the asmita narrative in a State where Lord Jagannath holds paramount importance is another example of the saffron party's ill-conceived strategy.

Elections are mostly about the perception of the citizenry. The BJP in Odisha doesn't seem to be winning the perception battle by relying on the asmita narrative alone. The term asmita is not even commonly used by the Odias. The party was not creative enough to come up with a term that would easily resonate with Odia voters.

Other key political issues, such as rising youth unemployment, the distressing state of health and education, economic migration, and so on have been pushed to the background with the talk of asmita. Despite Odisha having the highest youth unemployment rate in the country, as per a recent International Labour Organization report, the

issue found rare mention in the BJP's election campaigns. The party has also missed the opportunity to appeal to the crucial youth demographic. While the BJD made efforts to court this segment just a few months before the election, casting doubts on its genuine commitment, the BJP's youth outreach programmes have remained limited.

The Opposition's campaign, while emphasising asmita, have also failed to effectively tackle the BJD's core strength – its support among women. There are at least 70 lakh women self-help group (SHG) members in Odisha who form the backbone of women's political agency in the rural parts. The Opposition lacks serious intent to penetrate the robust structure of women SHG networks that largely favours the BJD.

The strategy of focusing on asmita over governance failures may have only appealed to a limited segment of upper-middle class voters who may not hold much electoral significance. The BJP does not appear to have learnt from its poor performance in the Panchayat election held two years ago, where it only won about 5% of the Zilla Parishad seats, a massive decline from its previous performance.

Moreover, by only targeting Mr. Pandian, the BJP has left brand Naveen unscathed. Deflecting attacks on his own image has been Mr. Patnaik's single most successful strategy and the reason for his endurance throughout his more than two decade term in office. The Opposition's campaign has played into his strengths. Mr. Patnaik could not have hoped for a better scenario.

Subhankar Nayak is a policy researcher. X: @subhankarnayak

Andhra and Telangana have many of India's richest MP candidates

Three regional parties from these two States fielded candidates with some of the highest average assets

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The political parties in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have fielded some of the richest politicians in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. These are the two States where the worth of the average assets of candidates in the fray is the highest. This is mainly due to the relatively rich candidates who have been fielded by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS), and the Jana Sena Party (JSP). The TDP features first on the list of the top 10 parties with the highest average assets of candidates; the JSP and BRS feature third and fourth. The Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) is eighth on the list.

Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani of the TDP, who is competing for the Guntur seat, is the richest in the fray with assets worth ₹5,706 crore. The TDP's poorest candidate declared assets worth ₹3 crore. Apart from the regional parties, even the candidates of national parties who were fielded from these States are relatively rich. The second richest in the fray, with assets worth ₹4,568 crore, is the BJP's Konda Vishweshwar Reddy, who is competing from the Chevella seat in Telangana. The Congress candidate from Chevella, Gaddam Ranjith Reddy, with assets worth ₹436 crore, is also among the richest. Many other relatively rich candidates such as the BJP's C.M. Ramesh (₹498 crore); the Congress' Y.S. Sharmila Reddy (₹182 crore); the TDP's Prabhakar Reddy Vemireddy (₹716 crore) and Sriharat Mathukumili (₹299 crore); the BRS' Kasani Gyaneshwar Kasani (₹228 crore), Nama Nageshwara Rao (₹156 crore), and Kyama Mallesh (₹145 crore); and the YSRCP's Chalamalasetty Sunil (₹150 crore) and Simhadri Chandra Sekhar Rao (₹139 crore) are also competing from these two States. **Chart 1** shows the candidate-wise average

assets in ₹ crore.

Chart 2 shows the party-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore. In charts 1 and 2, only select parties and their candidates are depicted. They have been chosen based on various parameters such as the number of candidates fielded, geography, and the party's popularity. As noted earlier, the TDP is on top of the list in terms of average assets of candidates (with its candidates having average assets of ₹416 crore) followed by the Janata Dal (Secular) (₹94 crore), the JSP (₹82 crore), and the BRS (₹54 crore). The BJP features seventh on the list with its candidates having average assets of ₹41 crore behind the two parties which split from the Nationalist Congress Party. The parties from Tamil Nadu – the AIADMK and the DMK – feature ninth and tenth, respectively. Congress candidates feature 14th on the list with average assets of ₹25 crore. The Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party headed by Mehabooba Mufti (₹1.4 crore), the CPI(M) (₹1.4 crore), and the BSP (₹2.6 crore) are at the bottom of the list.

Chart 3 shows the State-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore. Only major States were considered. However, all the parties and independents were included. Candidates in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have average assets of ₹21 crore and ₹14 crore, respectively – the highest. Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka were the other States in the top five. Chhattisgarh (₹1.3 crore), J&K U.T. (₹2 crore) and Kerala (₹2.3 crore) are at the bottom of the list.

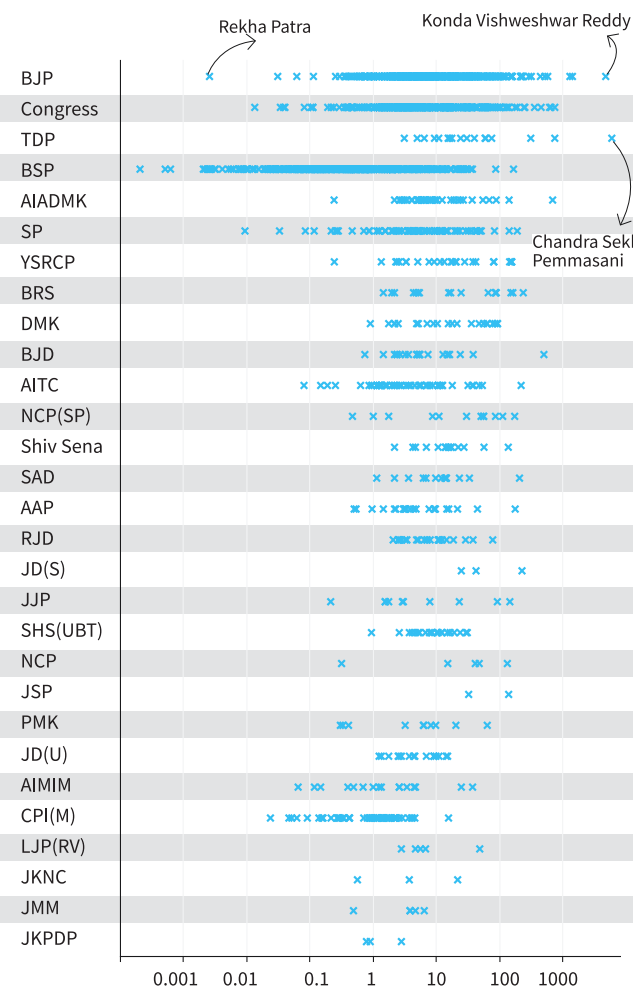
Notably, the BJP's poorest candidate is Rekha Patra. She is one of the women who spearheaded the Sandeshkhali movement against Trinamool leaders. She declared assets worth ₹25,000. While all the parties couldn't be depicted, an analysis including all candidates and independents showed that as many as 46 candidates, mostly independents, declared that they did not have any assets.

Richie rich

The data were sourced from the Association for Democratic Reforms. Parties have been chosen based on various parameters such as the number of candidates fielded, geography, and the party's popularity

Money power: TDP national president Nara Chandrababu Naidu participating in a road show in Tenali city. On his left, the richest candidate, Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani can be seen. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Chart 1: The chart shows the candidate-wise average assets in ₹ crore



TDP: Telugu Desam Party; BRS: Bharat Rashtira Samithi; BJD: Biju Janata Dal, NCP: Nationalist Congress Party; NCP(SP): Nationalist Congress Party – Sharadchandra Pawar; SAD: Shiromani Akali Dal; JD(U): Janata Dal (United); AIMIM: All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimene; LJP(RV): Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas); PMK: Pattali Makkal Katchi; JKPDP: Jammu & Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party; JKN: Jammu & Kashmir National Conference; SHS(UBT): ShivSena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) JNJP: Jannayak Janta Party



Chart 2: The chart shows the party-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore

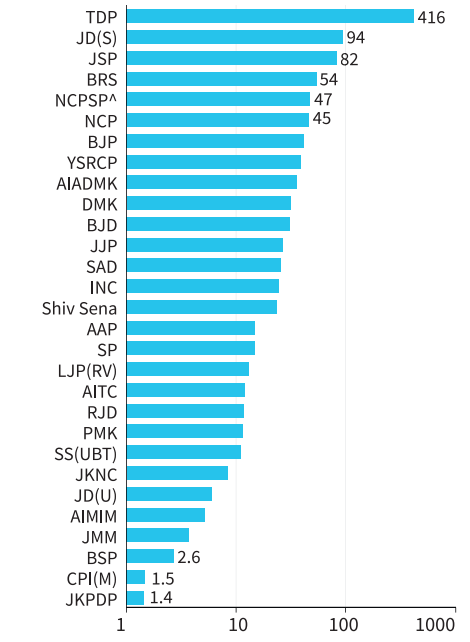
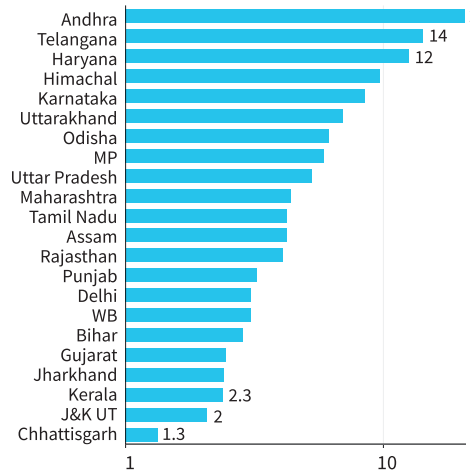


Chart 3: The chart shows the State-wise average assets of candidates in ₹ crore



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1974

Israel and Syria agree on military disengagement

Washington, May 29: Israel and Syria agreed to-night on a military disengagement on the Golan Heights – a victory for the marathon shuttle diplomacy of the U.S. Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger.

The Israeli-Syrian agreement coming 32 days after Dr. Kissinger began his longest overseas mission terminated the war of October 1973. Dr. Kissinger had brought about earlier disengagement between Israel and Egypt.

President Nixon who announced the accord said that military representatives of the Israel and Syria will sign the agreement in Geneva on Friday.

(Radio Israel said Soviet and American delegates would also sign the accord at Geneva.) The President called it a "major diplomatic achievement" and praised Dr. Kissinger for his tenacity in pressing for an agreement.

Mr. Nixon said the Israeli-Syrian agreement had "removed a significant obstacle to a permanent solution of the West Asia conflict."

He promised persistent American attempts, in co-operation with all Governments in West Asia, to achieve a peaceful solution. He described the chances for such a settlement as "better than ever before in the past 25 years."

Details of the agreement will be announced officially to-morrow when Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir will present the agreement to the Knesset (Parliament).

While President Nixon made the announcement in Washington a statement was broadcast by Damascus Radio. The Israeli Cabinet was meeting to give the final approval to the agreement before making the announcement.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 30, 1924

Radio club in Madras

Mr. A. Conningsby, Engineer for Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company, who was here in connection with the establishment of a Radio Club in Madras was interviewed by the Associated Press of India said that a broadcasting transmitter was installed in the premises of Messrs. Crompton and Co. Mount Road and the supervision of Messrs. Webb and Green and a draped studio on the lines of those in Calcutta and Bombay intended for concert performances.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The expected increase in India's natural gas demand in 2024

7 In per cent. This rise is driven by higher usage in the industrial and fertilizer sectors. Also, heatwaves across the country will create a surge in power consumption. Natural gas demand had increased by 10% in 2023. REUTERS

The largest help package Sweden has sent to Ukraine

1.23 In \$ billion. The support package will be the 16th from Sweden since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The donation includes two SAAB ASCC airborne early warning and control airplanes. PTI

Trash-carrying balloons found by South Korea's military

260 North Korea flew hundreds of trash-carrying balloons toward South Korea in one of its most bizarre provocations against its rival in years. AP

The amount the INDIA bloc would deposit in women's accounts

8,500 in ₹. Chief Post Master of GPO Bengaluru informed of an unprecedented rush of women hurrying to open India Post Payment Bank accounts. PTI

Climate dues cleared by rich nations after two-year delay

100 in \$ billion. Wealthy countries met their target of providing annual climate aid to poorer countries for the first time in 2022, the OECD said. AFP
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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An overview of the AMRUT scheme

What was the purpose of the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation? What was the revenue set aside for the scheme? What has been its progress so far? What are the various shortcomings and how should they be addressed?

EXPLAINER

Tikender Singh Panwar

The story so far:

Around 36% of India's population is living in cities and by 2047 it will be more than 50%. The World Bank estimates that around \$840 billion is required to fund the bare minimum urban infrastructure over the next 15 years. The AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) scheme was a flagship programme launched by the NDA-1 government in June 2015, with its 2.0 version launched on October 1, 2021.

What is the AMRUT scheme?

Some of the challenges in infrastructure development with respect to water, mobility, and pollution were to be met by this scheme with some financial assistance from the Centre and the rest of the share mobilised by both States and respective cities. The mission was drawn to cover 500 cities and towns with a population of over one lakh with notified municipalities. The purpose of the AMRUT mission was to (i) ensure that every household has access to a tap with assured supply of water and a sewerage connection (ii) increase the value of cities by developing greenery and well-maintained open spaces such as parks and (iii) reduce pollution by switching to public transport or constructing facilities for non-motorised transport. The total outlay for AMRUT was ₹50,000 crore for five years from FY 2015-16 to FY 2019-20.

AMRUT 2.0 was aimed at making cities 'water secure' and providing functional water tap connections to all households in all statutory towns. Ambitious targets were set up such as providing 100% sewage management in 500 AMRUT cities. The total outlay for AMRUT 2.0 is ₹2,99,000 crore, with the Central outlay being ₹76,760 crore for five years, and the rest of the amount to be mobilised by the



At work: The Lions Park being renovated under AMRUT-2 by Kozhikode Corporation in 2023. FILE PHOTO

States and cities.

How much money has been utilised?

The AMRUT dashboard shows that as of May 19, 2024, a sum of ₹83,357 crore has been dispersed so far. This amount has been utilised to provide a total of 58,66,237 tap connections, and 37,49,467 sewerage connections. A total of 2,411 parks have been developed, and 62,78,571 LED lights have been replaced. These works include the contributions made by States and cities.

What is the reality?

It is estimated that about 2,00,000 people die every year due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene. In 2016, the disease burden due to unsafe water and sanitation per person was 40 times higher in India than in China. This has not

improved much. Huge amounts of waste water and little treatment enhances the vulnerability and incidence of diseases. The 150 reservoirs monitored by the central government, which supplies water for drinking and irrigation, and are the country's key source of hydro-electricity, were filled to just 40% of its capacity a few weeks ago. Around 21 major cities are going to run out of ground water. In a NITI Aayog report it was stated that 40% of India's population will have no access to drinking water by 2030. Nearly 31% of urban Indian households do not have piped water; 67.3% are not connected to a piped sewerage discharge system; and average water supply per person in urban India is 69.25 litres/day, whereas the required amount is 135 litres.

Additionally, air quality in AMRUT cities and in other large urban settlements

continue to worsen. A National Clean Air Programme was launched by the central government in 2019, as AMRUT 2.0 focused only on water and sewerage and because the air quality concerns of AMRUT 1.0 were far from addressed.

What went wrong?

The basic fundamental of the scheme was erroneously constructed. Instead of a holistic approach, it took on a project-oriented attitude. Furthermore, AMRUT was made for cities with no participation from the cities. It was quite mechanical in design, with hardly any organic participation of the elected city governments, and driven by mostly private interests. The project was owned by bureaucrats, parastatals, and large technology-based companies. For example, in the governance architecture, the apex committee is headed by the secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MOHUA) and all the members are non-elected. Similarly, the State level high powered committee is headed by the chief secretary with a private nexus of consultants and professionals. Peoples' representatives are completely missing, in violation of the 74th constitutional amendment.

Moreover, water management in cities must factor in climate and rainfall patterns of the area and existing infrastructure of combined sewers. It is no big surprise that most of the sewage treatment plants are designed in such a way that the travel distance of average faecal matter is more than the average commute of a worker to work! Since the drivers are large private players and builders, real estate development has become a proxy for urban planning – disappearance of water bodies and lakes, disrupted storm water flows, and absence of storm water drainage is very common.

The scheme needs nature based solutions and a comprehensive methodology with a people centric approach and empowering local bodies.

Author is former Deputy Mayor, Shimla, and Member, Kerala Urban Commission.

THE GIST

The AMRUT (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation) scheme was a flagship programme launched by the NDA-1 government in June 2015.

The purpose of the AMRUT mission was to (i) ensure that every household had access to a tap with assured supply of water and a sewerage connection (ii) increase the value of cities by developing greenery and well-maintained open spaces such as parks and (iii) reduce pollution by switching to public transport or constructing facilities for non-motorised transport.

AMRUT was made for cities with no participation of the cities. It was quite mechanical in design.

Why does instability and chaos persist in Haiti?

Did the resignation of former Prime Minister Ariel Henry stop gang violence in the region?

Dhriti Mukherjee

The story so far:

Following a three-month forced shutdown, Haiti's main international airport in Port-au-Prince reopened, sparking hopes for shipment of essential products. However, gang violence persists in the capital, though most of the gangs' demands have been addressed. Meanwhile, after months of delay due to legal obstacles and violence, an advance team of the Kenyan special forces police landed in Haiti to combat the instability.

What is being done for stability?

After Prime Minister Ariel Henry's resignation on April 24, the formation of a Council with seven members was the first major development. The Council has been tasked with restoring order in Haiti, setting the agenda of a new Cabinet, forming a national security council, and appointing an electoral commission to help conduct polls. It enjoys the backing

of the Caribbean countries and the U.S. Caricom, a Caribbean trade bloc which helped form the council, said that the installation of the "politically inclusive council signals the possibility of a new beginning for Haiti." While Finance Minister Michel Patrick Boisvert was appointed as interim Prime Minister, on April 30, former Minister Fritz Bélizaire was chosen for the post by the Council.

What is the situation at present?

Though there is a Council, there is also a divide. During its first task of choosing a Prime Minister, four of the seven voting members chose Mr. Bélizaire. This decision to appoint the little-known official was taken without consulting the rest of the council or holding a formal vote. This divide has reportedly strengthened worries of the Council using its position to further its own corrupt needs, following a pattern consistent with previous political officials in Haiti. Moreover, gang violence continues. The insufficiently armed national police

are still unable to counter the violence. Gang violence has become a part of daily life in Haiti over the last two decades, enabled by a weakened security apparatus, lack of effective law enforcement and widespread impunity. In the first three months of 2024, as per UN estimates, more than one person was killed due to gang violence every hour.

Why does gang violence continue?

One of the driving forces behind gang violence was the continued control exercised by Mr. Henry, and it was expected that his resignation would allow for a semblance of peace and stability. However, not only has the violence continued (though there has been a reduction), there are new concerns.

In May, UNICEF's Representative in Haiti, Bruno Maes, noted that the "health system is on the verge of collapse" as it is faced with "violence, mass displacement, dangerous epidemic and increasing malnutrition." Six out of 10 hospitals that are operational in the country are barely

managing to function, and the biggest problem currently is the "strangling of supply chains." About 1.6 million of the 4.4 million in Haiti face emergency levels of food insecurity, and the expected arrival of the monsoons will bring with it waterborne diseases such as cholera.

What is next for Haiti?

There are three specific challenges for Haiti. First, the divide within the transitional Council underscores the inherently fragile political landscape of the country. A rocky start may set the tone for the rest of its decisions and the country's faith in it. Second, the persistent threat posed by armed gangs continues to loom large over Haiti, perpetuating a cycle of violence and insecurity that hampers efforts to restore law and order. Gangs have warned of more violence if they are not given a seat at the table with the Council, and if their demand for amnesty for their crimes is not granted.

Third, the deployment of a UN-backed security mission, comprised of Kenyan police forces, has sparked controversy and raised concerns about potential violation of human rights. While the mission aims to bolster efforts to combat gang violence and restore stability, there are fears that it may inadvertently exacerbate tensions and contribute to human rights abuses.

Dhriti Mukherjee is a Research Assistant at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru.

THE GIST

After Prime Minister Ariel Henry's resignation on April 24, the formation of a Council with seven members was the first major development. The Council had been tasked with restoring order in Haiti.

One of the driving forces behind gang violence was the continued control exercised by Mr. Henry, and it was expected that his resignation would allow for a semblance of peace and stability. However, violence has continued.

The deployment of a UN-backed security mission, comprised of Kenyan police forces, has sparked controversy.

Architects of hate: who is fuelling discord in India’s digital elections?

While the MCC governs political speeches and ads by political parties and candidates, and Section 123 of the RPA, 1951 prohibits the promotion of enmity between communities through political ads or speeches, there is no explicit provision for regulation of content posted by third parties

LOKNITI-CSDS

Sanjay Kumar
Aditi Singh
Abhishek Sharma
Prateek Hanamant Pawar

In the current political landscape, the role of third-party advertisers has emerged as a formidable force, shaping narratives and influencing public opinion. Across diverse democracies, from the U.S., the U.K., and to India, the rise of third-party actors has raised profound questions about the integrity of electoral processes and the need for robust regulation.

Recently, the Election Commission issued a directive to platform X (formerly Twitter) to remove an animated video targeting Muslims (as reported by *The Hindu* on May 8). This directive, citing provisions of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 stands in stark contrast to the unchecked proliferation of inflammatory content on platforms like Meta (Table 2). This glaring discrepancy highlights a fundamental flaw in the legal framework governing political advertising in India. Despite provisions aimed at ensuring fairness and accountability, the current regulatory landscape falls short, allowing third parties to operate with impunity, free from scrutiny over the content they disseminate and the source of their financial backing.

Building on the discourse initiated in a recent article published in *The Hindu* dated May 6, which highlighted the issue of unregulated expenditure by third-party campaigners, this study conducted by Lokniti-CSDS delves deeper into the realm of online political advertising by third parties. The study examined a randomised selection of ads from all third-party campaigners who are among the top 50 spenders on Google and Meta from April 1 to April 30. The study revealed a significant presence of 27 advertisers on Meta and 24 on Google among the top 50 spenders.

Ad analysis

Out of the total 51 advertisers identified on both platforms, a striking trend emerged wherein pages were actively campaigning through political ads in support of various political parties. Pages endorsing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) while criticising the INDIA alliance were predominant, and were focused largely around the Hindi belt region. Conversely, pages supporting the Indian National Congress (INC) and criticising the BJP were fewer, yet they also targeted almost identical locations (Table 1).

Besides promoting national parties, a substantial number of third-party advertisers are actively engaged in advertising for State-level parties, underscoring their pervasive influence even at the local level of Indian politics. This phenomenon reflects the far-reaching impact of third-party advertisers, extending beyond national narratives to shape local dynamics.

For analysing content of third-party ads, we focused on three controversial themes to underscore the problematic content they promote. Seven prominent advertisers, heavily utilising these themes, were identified on Meta. Nearly all the seven advertisers were found to post Islamophobic content, misinformation, or derogatory remarks (Table 2). Notably, among all the

The menace of third-party political advertisers

Across diverse democracies, from the U.S., the U.K., and to India, the rise of third-party actors has raised profound questions about the integrity of electoral processes and the need for robust regulation



Election fervour: Cutouts of Prime Minister Narendra Modi adorn a BJP vehicle during a campaign for the Lok Sabha polls, in Kolkata on April 15. ANI

Table 1: The details of advertisers with affiliation to political parties, among the 51 identified on Google and Meta

Affiliation	Number of advertisers	Amount spent	Impressions	Age of audience (in years)*	Locations*
Pro-BJP/Anti INDIA	20	53.7M	Above 1M	18 and above	Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Telangana
Pro-YSRCP	9	8.9M	Above 1M	18-44	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana
Pro- TDP	6	2.4 M	Above 1M	NIL	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana
Pro-DMK	5	31.9M	Above 1M	18-34	Tamil Nadu
Pro-AITMC	2	3.1M	Above 1M	25-44	West Bengal
Pro-Congress/ Anti-BJP	2	1.4M	Above 1M	18 and above	Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka
Pro- AIADMK	2	0.18 M	Above 1M	NIL	Tamil Nadu
Anti-AITMC	1	1.5M	Above 1M	18-34	West Bengal
Pro- Shiv Sena	1	0.11 M	Above 1M	NIL	Maharashtra
Pro- BJD	1	12.3M	Above 1M	18-34	Odisha
Pro- NTK	1	0.07 M	Above 1M	NIL	Tamil Nadu
Pro - JanaSena	1	0.57 M	Above 1M	NIL	Andhra Pradesh, Telangana

*The ads are most consumed by audiences in the specified age group and location.

Advertiser(s)	Islamophobic	Anti-Opposition, propaganda and misinformation	Making derogatory/defamatory remarks
Sidha Chashma	26%	47%	5%
Political X-Ray	17%	71%	NIL
Meme Hub	9%	50%	5%
Amaar Sonar Bangla	6%	59%	6%
MemeXpress	5%	66%	NIL
Malabar Central	4%	61%	NIL
Mahathugbandhan	NIL	39%	23%

Table 3: Problematic themes in ads
Islamophobic content | Anti-Opposition, propaganda and misinformation | Derogatory/defamatory remarks

Table 4: Analysis of the problematic themes of ads across third party advertisers on Meta with respect to the amount spent, impressions, audience age, and location

Themes/elements	Average amount	Average impressions	Consumed by (age in years) *	Major locations*
Islamophobic elements	Above 100K	Above 1M	18-34	Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan
Anti-Opposition elements	Above 100K	Above 1M	18 and above	Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bihar
Derogatory/defamatory slurs	Above 100K	Above 1M	18-34	Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, West Bengal

*The ads are most consumed by audiences in the specified age group and location.

Besides promoting national parties, third-party advertisers are also engaged in advertising for State-level parties, underscoring their influence even at a local level

advertisers, some boasted intriguing names that warrant attention. For instance, ‘Mahathugbandhan’ (Maha Thug Bandhan) posted its content against the I.N.D.I.A alliance (Maha Gath Bandhan), while ‘Hirak Rani Bye Bye’ took its name from the movie *Hirak Rajar Deshe*, depicting Mamta Banerjee as a dictator.

Among the seven advertisers analysed on Meta, it was evident that a significant proportion of their ads reflected concerning trends. On an average, each of these seven advertisers shared approximately 11% content with Islamophobic undertones, and around

56% of their ads disseminated misinformation or propaganda against opposition parties. These ads often included generalised criticism tainted with misinformation and propagandist language. Furthermore, an average of nearly 10% of these ads per advertiser, were found to contain derogatory comments or defamatory statements targeting political parties or candidates.

Who sees it and where?

The gravity of such content can only be truly understood by delving into its expenditure and reach, gauged through impressions, audience demographics, and geographical location.

Upon analysing a randomised sample of advertisements by third-party advertisers on Meta, it was revealed that each of the three identified themes had expenditures exceeding ₹100K. Remarkably, the analysed ads posted by

third-party advertisers on Meta were found to have spent more than 100k on each of the three identified themes (Table 4). Further, the analysed ads on these themes collectively garnered more than one million impressions (Table 4).

However, the concerning revelation lies in the demographic breakdown – while Islamophobic content was predominantly consumed by the 18-34 age group, the most alarming fact is that the highest consumption occurred within the 18-24 age bracket, mostly in States like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (Table 4). This underscores the pressing need for heightened awareness and proactive measures to address the impact of such content on young minds.

Legal loopholes for advertisers

The Handbook on Media Matters for CEOs and DEOs, issued by the Election Commission in February 2024, presents contradictory regulations regarding political advertisements by third parties. On Page 19 of Chapter 2, it prohibits such advertisements, citing the potential for undue benefits to other parties or candidates, excluding contesting candidates or political parties. However, Page 32 of the same chapter mandates political parties, groups, organizations, associations, and individuals to seek prior clearance of political advertisements by the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC) before telecasting them on electronic media. Interestingly, the inclusion of “group/organisation/association” in the pre-certification requirement suggests that third parties should adhere to these regulations, revealing how the two above-mentioned provisions are ambiguous and contradictory to each other.

Furthermore, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) governs the content of political speeches and ads by political parties and candidates, and Section 123 of the RPA, 1951 prohibits the promotion of enmity between communities through political ads or speeches, deeming it a corrupt practice. However there is no explicit provision for regulation of content posted by third parties. This legal gap is revealed by the fact that the Election Commission has recently directed social media platforms to remove inciting content posted by parties or candidates during the current election cycle, yet no such action has been taken against third-party advertisers, whose content garners millions of impressions and targets impressionable age groups.

These gaps and loopholes highlight the pervasiveness of dirty politics, facilitated by third-party supporters disseminating harmful, propagandist content against opposing parties. It also reveals a systemic failure to hold these actors accountable, perpetuating a climate of misinformation and divisiveness in electoral discourse. As political parties and candidates might employ third-party advertisers to engage in dirty campaigning and circumvent other expenditure and content-related regulations, urgent reforms are needed to enhance transparency, accountability, and integrity in political advertising, safeguarding the democratic process from undue influence and manipulation.

Sanjay Kumar is a Professor at CSDS, Aditi Singh is an Assistant Professor at O.P. Jindal Global University, and Abhishek Sharma, Prateek Hanamant Pawar are researchers with Lokniti-CSDS.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmaniam

“Canard (A. K. Ramgopal, New Delhi).”

“ ‘Canard’ means ‘an unfounded rumour or story.’ Politicians very often use this word.

It is all a canard.

It is a stronger word than ‘rumour.’ Originally, canard meant ‘a hoax, a ridiculously extravagant report.’ ‘Canard’ in French means a duck. It is said that someone reported that he had 20 ducks and he killed 18 of them one by one in the following way: First he cut up one duck and threw it to the other ducks, cut up a second one and threw it to the remaining ducks. The last but one duck was gobbled up by the late one! This is a tall story and this was referred to as a ‘canard’. ‘Canard’ has two pronunciations. (1) The ‘c’ is pronounced ‘k.’ The first ‘a’ is pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘India.’ The second ‘a’ is pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘glass.’ The stress is on the second syllable. (2) the first ‘a’ is pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘man.’ The ‘second’ ‘a’ like the ‘a’ in ‘glass.’ The stress is on the first syllable.”

“Glam up (A. Rahman, Aligarh).”

“ ‘To glam up’ means ‘to give a glamorous, or superficially attractive appearance to something or somebody.’ *They were glammed up for the party. The building was glammed up for the function.*

‘Glam’ is a contraction of the word ‘glamour.’ ‘Glam’ is a colloquial word.” “Flake out (S. N. Verma, Calcutta).”

“ ‘Flake out’ means ‘to fall asleep or drop from exhaustion, to faint.’

After a hectic day, he flaked out in the drawing room.

When she returned home after a long day in the office, she flopped on the sofa and flaked out.”

“The Present Progressive Tense”

“Verbs like ‘hurt,’ ‘ache,’ ‘tickle,’ ‘itch’ go with the progressive or simple present tense. The progressive and the simple present are interchangeable and there is no change in meaning. Example: My hand is aching, my hand aches; my foot hurts, my foot is hurting; my hand is itching, my hand itches; I feel cold, I am feeling cold; You look tired, you are looking tired.

‘He always takes coffee in the afternoon’ means that he takes coffee in the afternoon. It is his habit to take some coffee in the afternoon. ‘He is always taking coffee in the afternoon’ means that he is constantly taking coffee in the afternoon. He is taking a lot of coffee in the afternoon. ‘You are telling me!’ is an idiom which means ‘I completely agree with you.’

The difference between ‘I am liking my work’ and ‘I like my work.’ Generally, ‘like’ is used. Occasionally, ‘liking’ is used when a person is still adjusting to his work. When someone has taken up a new job and is rather new to it, you may ask ‘How are you liking your new job?’ He/she may say I am liking it.’ ‘Liking’ suggests that the person is adjusting to the new job and likes it at the moment.

Published in The Hindu on March 10, 1992.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On May 29, 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers to reach the summit of Mount Everest. Here is a quiz on the expedition

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

How many attempts were made before Hillary finally succeeded?

QUESTION 2

Where was Hillary from? Which was the peak in his country that he ascended before his expedition to Mt. Everest?

QUESTION 3

In which year was the first expedition to Mt. Everest done?

QUESTION 4

Two mountaineers disappeared on the third attempt, giving rise to the long-standing speculation of whether or not the pair might have reached the summit first. Who were they?

QUESTION 5

Who was the first Indian on Mt. Everest? In which year did it happen?



Visual question:

Identify this mountaineer who climbed Mt. Everest. What is her achievement?

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

1. The reason why winter weather can exacerbate the painful symptoms women feel during periods. **Ans: It is believed that excessive pain during periods is often caused by the secretion of prostaglandins. The cold weather can trigger an increase in this secretion, leading to more painful cramps**

2. The amount of blood a woman’s body loses during a period. **Ans: While it might seem like a lot, the total amount of blood lost during one normal period is usually about 60 ml, or just over 56 gm**

3. The condition referred to as ‘man periods’. **Ans: Irritable Male Syndrome**

4. The word that defines the end of a woman’s reproductive years. **Ans: Menopause**

5. The production house which made a movie called *The Story of Menstruation*. **Ans: Walt Disney Animation Studio**

Visual: This hormone is responsible for triggering menstruation. **Ans: Estrogen**

Early Birds: Sunil Kannada| Lekshmy Harikumar

Setting the standard

India must pick right cues from EU's AI law

The European Union Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, ratified by the EU Parliament in March and expected to come into force from next month, is a groundbreaking piece of legislation that can become the benchmark for other countries, including India, on the regulation and use of AI. The Act seeks to balance innovation with safety and ethical considerations. It categorises AI applications into different risk levels and lays down guardrails accordingly. This stratified approach allows for a nuanced regulation that can foster innovation while safeguarding the public interest.



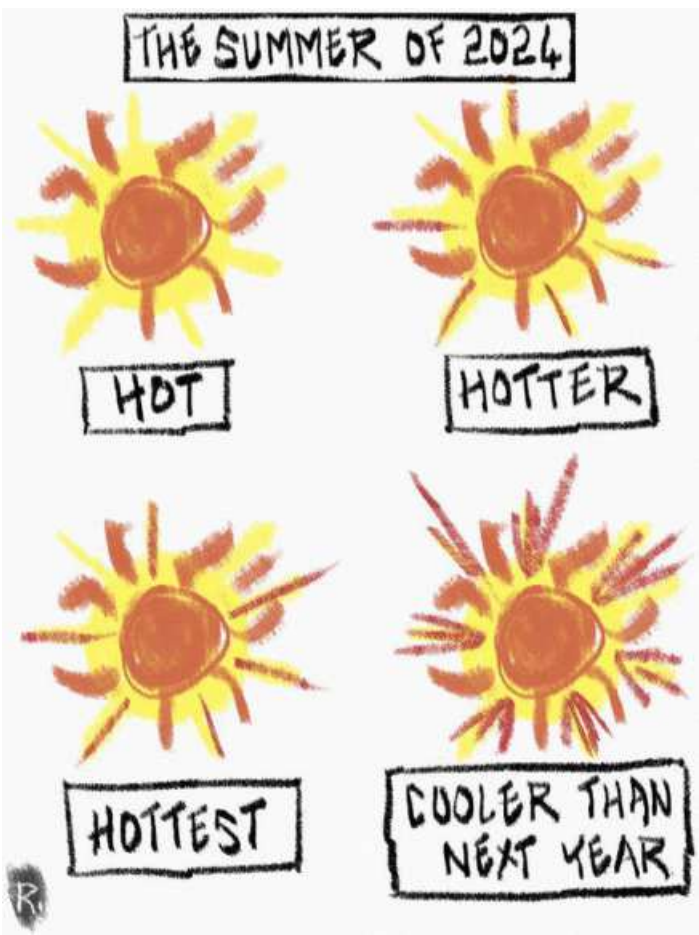
The EU Parliament website points out that the law limits the use of biometric identification systems to “narrowly defined situations”, bans social scoring, predictive policing (based on profiling a person), emotion recognition in the workplace and schools, untargeted scraping of facial images to create social recognition databases, and AI that manipulates human behaviour by exploiting vulnerabilities. High-risk AI systems, such as those used in critical infrastructure, education, vocational training, employment, healthcare, banking and law enforcement, will be subject to transparency, accountability (maintaining use logs), and human oversight. Citizens will have the right to submit complaints about AI systems. The Act mandates transparency for AI systems interacting with humans, ensuring that users are aware when they are engaging with an AI. This requirement promotes trust and informed consent, crucial components in the responsible deployment of AI technologies. Going forward, India too should develop its law and rules by matching them with levels of risk. The recently concluded Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) summit in Delhi marked a significant milestone in shaping the global discourse in this respect. The summit showcased the need for international collaboration in balancing innovation and curbing risks.

Meanwhile, the Act is not without its critics. One significant concern is the potential compliance burden it places on companies, especially start-ups and small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs). The detailed documentation and rigorous testing required for high-risk AI systems could deter smaller entities from entering the market, thereby limiting diversity, competitiveness and technological advancement. The other big worry is the exemptions provided in the name of national security where the governments have a carte blanche to bypass crucial AI regulations.

There is a global race for AI dominance. It is essential to establish global agreements and standards for AI development and use. The incoming new government at the Centre must urgently establish guardrails for AI, and avoid the delays seen in formulation of personal data protection rules. Proactive legislation will foster responsible innovation, protect citizens' rights, and position India as a leader in the ethical use of AI.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



Savings data: Reading the fineprint

PLUS AND MINUS. Rise in physical assets is welcome, but rising loans towards housing and vehicles can create default risks



MANAS R DAS

The Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation recently released the National Accounts Statistics 2024, with data up to 2022-23. Using the database, the implications of household (HH) savings and liabilities for the financial sector are studied here.

Net HH Financial Savings (NHHFS) is important because it mostly finances the two deficit sectors — general government sector and non-financial corporations. Three post-pandemic years — 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23 — are considered for the analysis, with all values taken at current prices.

SOME MACRO RATIOS

During 2020-21 to 2022-23:

*The ratio of Gross HH Savings to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell from 26.4 per cent to 24.2 per cent. The decline originated solely from Gross HH Financial Savings (GHHFS) whose ratio to GDP fell from 15.4 per cent to 11.0 per cent.

*In contrast, the ratio of Gross HH Savings in Physical Assets (GHHSPA) to GDP jumped from 10.8 per cent to 12.9 per cent.

*The ratio of Gross HH Financial Liabilities (GHHFL) to GDP shot up from 3.7 per cent to 5.8 per cent.

*Consequently, the ratio of NHHFS to GDP more than halved from 11.7 per cent to 5.3 per cent.

FINANCIAL SAVINGS

GHHFS was quite diversified and mostly comprised currency, deposits with banks, shares and debentures including mutual funds (MFs), investment in small savings, insurance funds, and provident/pension funds, which together constituted 96-97 per cent of the respective totals in the three study years.

The share of currency declined gradually from 12 per cent in 2020-21 to 10 per cent in 2021-22 and to eight per cent in 2022-23. This reflected the success of non-cash modes of payments, which, in turn, acted as a check on currency hoarding or unaccounted money. As the public demand for currency notes eases further, RBI's printing cost will reduce.

However, the rising volumes of non-cash modes increased technological risks for banks in the form of cyber (financial) crimes. Banks need to make huge investments in technology and skilled personnel.

The share of deposits with banks declined sharply from 37 per cent in 2020-21 to 29 per cent in 2021-22 due to low term deposit rates, but smartly revived to 33 per cent in 2022-23 following higher interest rates. Huge deposits mobilised from Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana beneficiaries acted as a catalyst, underscoring the importance of financial inclusion.

However, banks' obsession with mobilisation of low-cost current, savings and shorter maturity term deposits may lead to asset-liability mismanagement, as banks also fund medium- to long-term projects for which longer maturity term deposits are necessary. The latter in turn will lend stability to HHs' bank deposit holdings.

The share of shares, debentures including MFs vaulted from three per cent in 2020-21 to eight per cent in 2021-22 and seven per cent in 2022-23. Low interest rates on bank deposits, a healthy capital market, demographic dividend, increasing financial/digital literacy, diversified products availability and promotional measures by broking firms and MFs instilled confidence in

Low interest rates on deposits, a healthy capital market, and promotional measures by MFs pushed households to switch to market-related products.

HHs to switch from bank deposits to capital market-related products.

However, the 'shift', which reflects the 'speculative motive' to save, makes HHs' savings portfolios vulnerable to market risk/volatility. It also competes with banks' deposit mobilisation, as, for example, MFs' systematic investment plans are close substitutes of recurring deposit schemes of banks.

The share of tax-deductible small savings stayed around 8-9 per cent. These savings compete with bank deposits, and interest rates offered thereon influence bank deposit interest rates.

The share of insurance funds hovered around 18-19 per cent. The database showed that life insurance funds constituted almost the whole of insurance funds. This may not be correct, as post-pandemic, HHs stormed into health insurance also.

This, coupled with the resolve of the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India to enhance health insurance coverage to all, will make savings in insurance an integral part of GHHFS.

The share of provident and pension funds rose from 16 per cent in 2020-21 to 21 per cent in 2021-22 and 2022-23.

Increasing share of insurance funds, and provident/pension funds indicates the 'precautionary motive' of HHs to save.

PHYSICAL ASSETS

GHHSPA was principally in the form of owning residential properties, a good development which is also incentivised by the government in many ways including fiscal concessions and targeted schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.

Per the National Housing Bank data, 'outstanding individual home loans' of the Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs) and Housing Financing Companies, a 'proxy' for savings in housing assets, continuously increased to ₹22,207 billion in 2020-21, ₹25,112 billion in 2021-22 and ₹28,650 billion in 2022-23.

However, many HHs do speculate in

the housing market, especially in urban/metro areas. It also creates default risk for banks particularly when the employment situation is under stress.

GOLD AND SILVER ORNAMENTS

The share of savings in the form of gold and silver ornaments remained almost static at 0.2 per cent of GDP mainly due to their heightened price, good returns from stocks and the upper-middle class switching to diamond and other precious stones/metals.

However, the traditional notion of gold as an 'idle' saving is waning as gold ornaments can be easily monetised via gold bonds, exchange traded funds and bank/non-bank loans.

FINANCIAL LIABILITIES

Bank advances, which constituted the bulk of GHHFL, rose, year-on-year, by 25 per cent to ₹6,051 billion in 2020-21, by 27 per cent to ₹7,696 billion in 2021-22 and by a whopping 54 per cent in 2022-23 to ₹11,884 billion. As ratio of GDP, bank advances outstanding against HHs rose serially from 3.0 per cent in 2020-21 to 3.3 per cent in 2021-22 and 4.4 per cent in 2022-23.

The related RBI data revealed that within HH loans from SCBs, housing and vehicle loans together commanded nearly six-tenth of the total non-food credit in all the three years.

Certainly, multiplier effects of these sectors are beneficial; nevertheless, from banks' perspective, since they are medium- to long-term loans with 'contractual' repayment schedules, credit default risk escalates, especially when mostly the private sector employees, vulnerable to layoffs, avail themselves of such loans.

Further, housing and vehicle loans generate liquidity risk as their 'pre-owned' markets are thin.

To conclude, the saving 'culture' of the Indian HHs is widely acclaimed which, despite NHHFS declining to a five-year low, will not fade quickly.

The writer is a former senior economist, SBI. Views expressed are personal

Sustainable cooling, the answer to heat wave effects

Energy-efficient technologies to provide cooling solutions are the need of the hour

AS Mittal

The blistering heat wave across the country poses a threat to millions of workers engaged in farming, construction, and industrial operations. For many economies, this poses a significant threat to productivity. Therefore there is an urgent need for a climate-responsive action plan.

According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 1995, the working hours lost in India due to heat stress were 5.87 per cent in agriculture and construction, 2.95 per cent in industry, and 0.63 per cent in services.

These numbers are anticipated to increase to 9.04 per cent in agriculture and construction, 5.29 per cent in industry, and 1.48 per cent in services by 2030.

Specifically, agricultural and construction work, as well as work in steel plants and brick kilns, are expected to be the worst affected.

Heat stress reduces the ability of businesses to operate during the hottest hours. Temperature increases are expected to further diminish labour productivity, potentially rendering some agricultural areas unproductive and

displacing a large number of farm workers. The global economic losses due to heat stress at work were estimated at \$280 billion in 1995, and this figure is projected to increase to \$2,400 billion in 2030.

'COOLING' OPPORTUNITIES

A World Bank study, 'Climate Investment Opportunities in India's Cooling Sector', clearly indicates that utilising alternative and innovative energy-efficient technologies to meet the expected exponential rise in cooling demand is the key to combating the heat wave crisis.

In 2019, the India Cooling Action Plan (ICAP) was launched. It envisages looking at indoor cooling in buildings, cold chain solar refrigeration in the agriculture and pharmaceuticals sector, and air-conditioning in passenger transport.

The plan aims to reduce the demand for electricity-driven cooling by up to 25 per cent by 2037-38, potentially creating 2 million jobs for trained technicians and reducing the demand for refrigerants by around 31 per cent over the next two decades.

The report strongly advocates for the widespread adoption of such changes in India's affordable housing programme,



HEAT WAVE. Crippling costs

which could benefit over 11 million urban homes and over 29 million rural houses that the government aims to construct.

Public-private investments at district level cooling technologies are crucial. These cutting-edge technologies produce chilled water in a central plant, which is then distributed to multiple buildings through underground insulated pipes.

This drastically reduces the cost of providing cooling to individual buildings and can slash electricity bills by 20-30 per cent compared to the most efficient conventional cooling solution.

The Punjab Energy Development

Agency (PEDA) office in Chandigarh stands as a prime example of a climate-responsive building, delivering a cooling effect in the hottest months and warmth in winter. This example can be replicated at large in future green buildings construction.

To combat rising food and pharmaceutical wastage during transportation due to higher temperatures, the World Bank report unequivocally recommends addressing gaps in cold chain distribution networks. Investing in pre-cooling and refrigerated transport can substantially decrease food loss by about 76 per cent and reduce carbon emissions by 16 per cent.

India is resolute in its aim to phase out the production and use of ozone-depleting hydrochlorofluorocarbons, used as coolants in air conditioners and refrigerators. The report emphasises the urgency of improving servicing, maintenance, and disposal of equipment that uses hydrochlorofluorocarbons.

It is crucial to comprehend the implications of climate change for the workplace, particularly for those most affected and vulnerable.

The writer is Vice-Chairman, Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board. Views expressed are personal

● **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.

Progress or regress?

This refers to the Editorial 'Formidable brand' (May 29). Gains arising from IPL matches have been well-documented in it. However, TV viewers have to sacrifice a prominent part of the viewing space on the TV screen to accommodate advertisements almost throughout the game including within every over, which is so distracting. The hunt for profits has now degenerated the gentleman's game into a commercial source of entertainment. Michael Holding said

in 2011, "I don't watch Twenty-20. It is dumbing-down cricket." What would he would have said about IPL show?

YG Chouksey
Pune

Policy continuity

Raghuram Rajan's suggestion to stick to the policy path even if BJP fails to return to power (May 29) needs to be discussed and debated. Because the policy followed in the last 10 years has met with tremendous success but increased income inequality. Infrastructure development is

prioritised, GDP is inching forward and multi-millionaires and billionaires numbers are swelling but the livelihood issues of the poor persist. So India needs policies that promote.

AG Rajmohan
Anantapur

Class travel

The report that an increasing number of Indians want to travel business class once again demonstrates the growing inequality of incomes. Those rich enough to travel by air are upgrading

themselves while those who use cheaper modes of transport are finding it harder to pay for these services. The premium trains are running at a small fraction of their carrying capacity while the general and sleeper class has waiting lists running into hundreds.

Anthony Henriques

Mumbai

Skill development

Apropos the article 'The skill potential of tourism' (May 29), at the outset let's congratulate the Ministry

of Tourism for identifying the needs and matching the potential with ground realities.

There is need to reassess training facilities at ITIs and professional colleges to align their curricula with job potential in various sectors. Let's not forget the huge cost of allowing thousands of qualified engineers to take up jobs which could have been done by 12th twelfth-pass boys in IT sector during the last century.

MG Warrior

Mumbai

Nikki Haley in a spot

Her support for Trump has invited criticism

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Some in the US thought she was different and even believed that she was perhaps the last hope for a party that was increasingly falling into the hands of right wing extremists and cuckoos.

Even after Nikki Haley quit the race in March after bruising blows from former President Donald Trump, thousands were still voting for her in the Republican primaries. But her supporters must have been jolted when Haley said that she would be voting for Trump this November 5.

Right through the campaign trail Haley had some biting words and language for her former boss, calling him, among other things, “unhinged” or mentally lacking. Irrespective of the characterisations, Trump will be formally the Republican nominee at the party convention in Milwaukee in July. And with a view to giving the semblance of unity, Haley will perhaps give away her 93 delegates she won in the primaries adding on to Trump’s 2,229 already in the bag. There is little point in bringing up all that Haley had said during the course of heated moments in a campaign. After all, a lot of sparks flew in the 2020 political campaign as well in the Democratic campaign between the now Vice President Kamala Harris and President Joe Biden including an allusion that Harris had referred to Biden as a racist, something that was rejected and denied outright.

Still the fact remains that political campaigning brings out the best and the worst of candidates and the 2024 season has not been an exception.

That still would not answer the question why Haley chose this moment to make her statement and set herself up to the sharp criticism of being a wimp, joining a group of cowards that include many in the establishment of the Grand Old Party.

“They have chosen to promote a man who tried to overthrow American democracy. If Trump is re-elected in November he may finally succeed. Thanks, Nikki”, wrote Mary Ellen Klas in *Bloomberg*. By and large there is an impression that Haley’s image as a moderate that would give a healing touch to her party and the country as a whole has been dented.

Daughter of Indian immigrants and a former two-term Governor of the important state of South Carolina, Haley is known for her



NIKKI HALEY. Difficult choices
REUTERS

sharp skills and even managed herself well at the United Nations as America’s top envoy in Trump’s first administration.

Now, at the tail end of the campaign season, Haley must have reasoned that if she were to position herself for the future, this was the time to strike and still come away positive with the huge MAGA (Make America Great Again) base of support of Trump. Haley was the only one standing up to the withering onslaught of the Trump machine during the primaries and a person who refused to go away quietly.

Anything can happen in politics. Haley’s voting for Trump this November could also be seen as the former UN Ambassador getting into the Vice Presidential hopefuls list, something that the Republican nominee has yet to finalize. Trump was careful in commenting on Haley’s remarks. “...she’s a very capable person, and I’m sure she’s going to be on our team in some form, absolutely”, the former President said in New York. Refusals to get on the ticket or for that matter even a berth in a potential Trump administration are hard to come by, the usual refrain being “How can you say NO to the President?”.

Haley’s somewhat abrupt remark last week brings up another difficult question: what would thousands of her supporters do? Feel abandoned? Set themselves up to be wooed by the Biden camp? Join the MAGA crowd? Or just sit at home on the day of the polls?

It is a difficult choice both for the Haley group and for the Biden/Trump camps. Neither the incumbent President nor the challenging Republican can afford to have a huge swathe of voters, especially in battleground states, not voting on November 5 for the margins of victory have been quite slim in some instances.

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



SK SARKAR

Many countries have set up an independent water regulatory authority (WRA), and decentralised system of water governance with government playing the role of a facilitator.

An ideal framework of independent regulation minimises political interference in a sector, brings in technical expertise and efficiency, and provides a level playing field for private players.

In India, several policy initiatives in recent years have been taken for introducing independent regulation in the water sector. The National Water Policy (NWP) 2012 strongly encourages the establishment of “autonomous” water regulatory authorities for fair pricing of water uses, and for cost recovery.

The 14th Finance Commission (2015) also recommended that States should consider setting up of statutory water regulatory authorities so that the pricing of water for domestic, irrigation and other uses can be determined independently and in a judicious manner.

Maharashtra is the first State to enact the Water Regulatory Authority Act in 2005 and followed by 11 other States — Arunachal Pradesh (2006), Uttar Pradesh (2008), Andhra Pradesh (2009), Jammu & Kashmir (2010), Kerala (through ordinance, 2012), Gujarat (through notification, 2012), Punjab (2020), Haryana (2020), Telangana (2009), Uttarakhand (2013), and Jharkhand (2014).

Unfortunately, only four States, — Maharashtra, Haryana, Punjab and J&K — have a Water Regulatory Authority.

REGULATORY FRAMEWORK
In any independent regulation, the Water Regulatory Authority (WRA) should have core functions, recommendatory functions and advisory functions.

Table 1 shows that there is no uniformity in the framework of regulatory legislation across the States. Further, there is no model central legislation in the water sector as we have seen in the electricity sector. There is no consensus across States even on the model regulatory framework as framed by the erstwhile Planning Commission (2011).

As a result, there is no uniform approach in adopting water regulatory



Water regulatory framework in States

Core functions of WRA	Maharashtra	Haryana	Punjab	J&K
Tariff determination	Irrigation; bulk water	Surface water and treated waste water: retail (only recommendation to govt.)	commercial/industrial; ground water (except household drinking purpose); treated waste water	Irrigation, domestic, ground water, commercial and industrial
Promotion of competition	Trading of water entitlement	No provision	No provision	Provision exists
Role in non-economic areas	Conservation of water	Conservation of water and water pollution	Conservation of water	Conservation of water
Regulatory conditions of license of service providers	No provision	No provision	No provision	Regulate water use by licensees
Laydown quality of service standards	No provision	No provision	No provision	Provision exists
Role in private sector participation	No provision	No provision	No provision	No provision
Protection of consumer interest	No provision	No provision	No provision	No provision
Adjudication of disputes	No provision	No provision	No provision	Provision exists

Source: 1. Maharashtra Water Resources Regulatory Act, 2005, 2. J&K Water Resources (Regulation and Management) Act 2010
3. Haryana Water Resources (Conservation, Regulation and Management) Authority Act 2020 4. Punjab Water Resources (Management and Regulation) Act 2020

framework in India, and each State has enacted the WRA legislation independently. There is also no transparent process for selection of the members of WRA across States. There is bureaucratic predominance for the chairman’s post in the WRA.

Minimum attention has been given to ensure transparency of the regulatory process, accountability of the regulator, and facilitating participation of stakeholders of the water sector.

Many core functions for independent regulation in water sector have also not been adopted by the States. These are protection of consumer interest, laying down of safety standards, adjudicating

The model Bill should specify various functions of WRA, and also deal, with its autonomy, accountability, powers, relationship with government

disputes and differences involving stakeholders, promotion of competition, promoting economy in the supply of water and sewage services, and framing principles relating to terms and conditions of license.

The current regulatory framework does not also ensure a balance between “market based” approach and “government’s social commitment”.

AGENDA FOR ACTION
The enactment of non-uniform water regulatory legislation by various States shows that there is a need for enacting a draft model Bill on the subject. The Centre should evolve a consensus to develop a model Bill after due consultation with the key water sector players including States and other stakeholders.

Second, the model Bill should specify various functions of WRA, and also deal, with its autonomy, accountability, powers, relationship with government; in the case of autonomy, there should be provisions on transparent selection of regulators, qualification and

disqualification of members, commercial employment of members, tenures of members, reappointment of members, transparent removal of members, power to hire best experts by regulator, and existence of Regulatory Fund. There should be a State Water Resource Council, the highest policy making body, whose policy functions should deal with overall water sector management.

Third, once the model regulatory framework is agreed to at all levels including States, there is a need to enact a central legislation before its adoption by the States. Since water is a State subject, framing a central legislation will require taking recourse to Article 249 or 252 of the Constitution for its consideration by Parliament.

Fourth, a high degree of political commitment at all levels is a must for ensuring the success of independent regulation in the water sector.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) and former Secretary, Union Ministry of Water Resources

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

May 30, 2004

Working group moots RBI divesting stakes in DFIs

In a significant proposal, the working group set up by RBI, has suggested that the apex bank divest its ownership stakes in NABARD and NHB. However, it added that the RBI ensure that the standard of regulations or supervision exercised by NABARD, NHB and SIDBI over the institutions falling under respective domains are broadly at par with those maintained by the RBI.

Chidambaram allays investors’ fears

Investors should take market fluctuations in their stride but the Government over the next month will help ally their fears, assured the Union Finance Minister, Mr P Chidambaram. He was responding to a query by presspersons here on Saturday on the market fluctuations post elections.

Paswan directs PSU steel companies to publish prices

To prevent steel traders from misleading customers regarding steel prices and to bring in transparency in steel prices, public sector units would henceforth publish prices of various categories of steel items in regional newspapers every month or whenever there is price revision, said Union Minister of Steel, Chemicals and Fertilizers, Mr Ram Vilas Paswan.

New government must prioritise research, innovation

Sumali Moitra

A sharper focus on research and innovation should top the list of priorities of the next government at the Centre.

It is only through attaining a global leadership position in the technology arena – be that in artificial intelligence (AI), climate technologies etc. – that India can make a bigger mark for itself in the world stage and reduce dependence on other nations for critical technologies.

Despite the impressive strides made by India in digital public infrastructure, the country still has a long way to go on the innovation front.

Although India has significantly improved its position in the Global Innovation Index (GII) from 81 in 2015 to 40 in 2023, the country still lags

several of its Asian peers on the GII scale. The GII 2023 ranking saw China occupy the 12th spot and Hong Kong (China) the 17th position.

Singapore and the Republic of Korea were ranked 5 and 10 respectively. Other Asian nations that were ahead of India in the GII 2023 ranking were Japan (13), the United Arab Emirates (32), and Malaysia (36).

As on date, India does not have a single home-grown AI company that has come potentially close to redefining the world of artificial intelligence. India also continues to be heavily reliant on the West for latest climate technologies.

So, what steps should the next government take to provide a fillip to the innovation agenda?

* A strategic roadmap on how India can figure in the top-10 in the Global



R&D. Fostering innovation|ISTOCKPHOTO

Innovation Index to start with and progressively improve its ranking thereafter,

* Ensure that the Anusandhan National Research Foundation (NRF) which was approved by Parliament in 2023 lives up to its promise.

* Set out the areas where greater use of sophisticated AI technologies would

be encouraged so that deployment of the tech leads to significant manifest improvements in the quality of life of average citizens.

* Invest more in promoting education related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines, and;

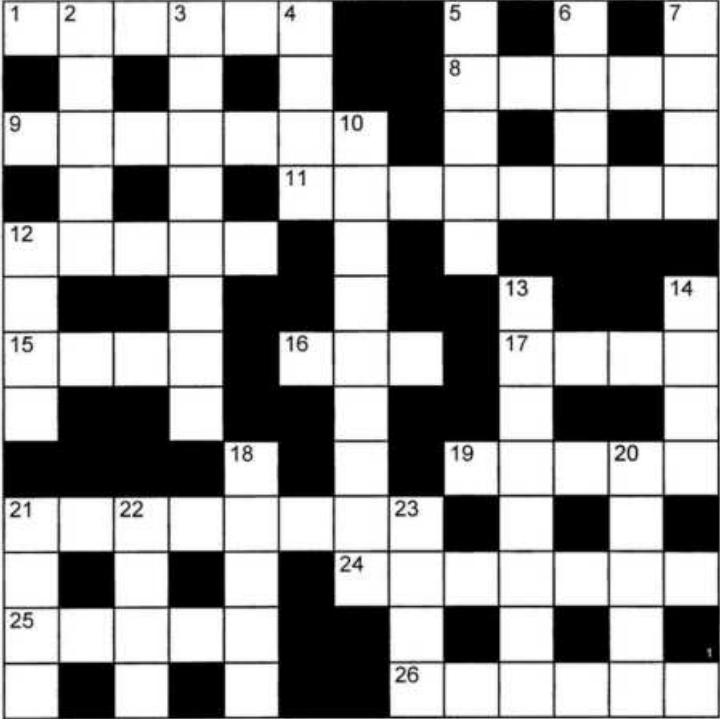
* Scale up India’s start-ups so that they can contribute in a bigger way to the innovation agenda.

At the end of the day, it does not sound right that India, which is already one of the world’s biggest economies, is not one of the global leaders on innovation.

The next government at the Centre working towards correcting this anomaly would, thus, be fitting.

The writer is a current affairs commentator. Views expressed are personal

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2450



EASY

ACROSS

- Achieved a goal (6)
- Unfettered (5)
- Choral composition (7)
- Type of paint finish (8)
- Part of gun; have in shop (5)
- Lie sprawled (4)
- Goods vehicle (3)
- Form of words for swearing (4)
- Imperial, goatee (5)
- Plate cut to shape required (8)
- Eating away of soil (7)
- Dairy product (5)
- One’s total possessions (6)

DOWN

- Recite in singing manner (5)
- Handbag (8)
- Palm fruit (4)
- Tumbler (5)
- Finished (4)
- Relate (4)
- Make worse (9)
- Seasoning (4)
- English county (8)
- Discard (4)
- Visible sign of burning (5)
- Retire, as bird (5)
- Mark correct (4)
- Submissive (4)
- Irish (language) (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Being cut in a line, got one home (6)
- So, Leo is drunk if not tight (5)
- Is able to utter childish farewell sung by many voices (7)
- Finish the paint : there may be yellow in it (8)
- One may have in store what was worn around the neck (5)
- To lie lazily around is no end sweet! (4)
- There’s a carrier of goods in front of the army (3)
- Swearwords might assume a hot form (4)
- A bit of barley stuck on by way of disguise perhaps (5)
- At entering a holy place, cut round it (8)
- Loss of soil I soon replace after some hesitation (7)
- The very best that’s not quite white (5)
- All one has is not beginning the best tea-break (6)

DOWN

- Sing out for the Italian wine I twice abandoned (5)
- Cruel tie manufactured by some old bag (8)
- When it happened to grow on a palm (4)
- Mirror, say, showing girl with gravity for a start (5)
- Being cooked, it is over (4)
- Relate how William was involved in Swiss folklore (4)
- Silver, at being discovered in tomb, will make it worse (9)
- Wit and good sense may be found in the cellar (4)
- A few rest, switching contents, for the County (8)
- Put something off to put garden implements in it (4)
- The object of love is to look hot (5)
- Retire in flighty fashion or turn up nothing on the way (5)
- Correct sign may be source of irritation to the sheepish (4)
- Mild-mannered, me? Only for three-and-a-half days! (4)
- Language in 13 is unlikely to be spoken there (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2449

ACROSS 1. Blunderbuss 8. Appetite 9. Dado 10. Plant 13. Reed 16. Cook 17. Sign 18. Lira 20. Stove 24. Undo 25. Collared 26. Regrettable

DOWN 2. Laps 3. Natal 4. Eaten 5. Udder 6. Water-colour 7. London pride 11. Amiss 12. Tango 14. Emit 15. Roar 19. Among 21. Trout 22. Villa 23. Oral

Transparent financing

Next govt must address political funding

Voting to elect the 18th Lok Sabha ends this week, and the results will be out on June 4, paving the way for the formation of the next Union government. Irrespective of the political shape and combination of the next government, it will need to quickly get down to business and address the policy and governance challenges. One such issue is related to elections themselves. In February, a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court struck down the electoral-bond scheme because it violated the right to information under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution. The apex court also directed State Bank of India, the authorised bank to issue electoral bonds, to disclose the details of the donations, which have since been thoroughly analysed in the media and elsewhere. The state of electoral funding in India has always been a matter of concern and the apex court's judgment has provided an opportunity to address all issues related to the finances of political parties.

The Union home minister in an interview recently highlighted the possible need for an alternative to the electoral-bond scheme. It is well understood that the use of black money, or money power in general, is a significant concern for Indian politics, and the next government must address this issue urgently. An alternative mechanism must address the basic reasons for scrapping the electoral-bond scheme. In this regard, the next government would do well to constitute a committee with representation from major political parties to study all aspects of political funding and come up with suggestions, which can be debated threadbare in Parliament before implementation.

With the Supreme Court judgment in the backdrop, the starting point for any alternative mechanism should be transparency. An opaque system of financing can have a number of ill effects, including policy capture. Furthermore, since the idea is to eliminate the influence of black money, the new mechanism can do away with cash donations. India is a world leader in payment solutions, and given the general popularity of the Unified Payments Interface, this should not be a problem. The committee may also look at the possibility of strengthening the Election Commission of India, enabling it to strictly monitor the income and expenditure of political parties. It is often suggested that state funding of elections or political parties should be introduced to contain the influence of illicit money, or money power in general, to preserve the level playing field. However, this can only work if there is proper monitoring of political finance and parties are restricted from raising funds from other sources.

Another option could be a national fund where citizens and corporations contribute. The collected funds can be distributed among political parties in a way that maintains a level playing field. This would also take away the fear of retribution, which is often cited as a reason against transparency in political funding. The committee can also be asked to look at the way money is spent. There are expenditure limits for contesting candidates, for example, but not for political parties, which can affect the balance in a competitive democracy. To be fair, the issue of political finance is complicated with no easy solutions. However, with the scrapping of the existing mechanism by a court judgment and the constitution of a new Lok Sabha, India will have an opportunity to set things right as far as possible.

Responsible development

Developments in OpenAI raise concern

There has been growing concern about the quality of governance at OpenAI. In the past few months, 11 key persons have quit but the problem started with the failed attempt to oust Chief Executive Officer Sam Altman in November last year. This was followed by a reconstitution of the board. Even as it released ChatGPT 4, OpenAI was embroiled in a controversy, with actor Scarlett Johansson claiming that her voice was cloned despite her refusing to give permission. The company has also been sued by *The New York Times* for copyright violation. Two former board members have written a widely circulated essay explaining why they think the mission of OpenAI to develop artificial intelligence (AI) responsibly has failed. One of the former board members recently said that Mr Altman withheld information and misrepresented things. Since ChatGPT was publicly released in November 2022, it has turned the field of generative AI upside down. The release sparked fierce competition and several others have released their own versions of Gen AI programmes and a multitude of applications have been developed riding on those platforms. The competition has, however, led to considerations of safety and responsible development being superseded by commercial concerns.

This is contrary to the stated mission of OpenAI, which is to ensure that AI benefits all of humanity. OpenAI itself is a not-for-profit company but it hived off the commercial side of ChatGPT into a for-profit subsidiary, which was valued at above \$80 billion in February 2024. When the move to oust Mr Altman was initiated, one of the cited reasons was that he wasn't being "candid" with the board. But the board itself was reconstituted and Mr Altman's vision of monetising ChatGPT seems to have clearly attained priority since. The exodus of many highly skilled workers — OpenAI cofounder Ilya Sutskever among them — could be for reasons including disagreeing with the direction of OpenAI. Corporate upheavals are normal in Silicon Valley and companies changing tack following boardroom struggles or reformatting of personnel is hardly unusual. But it is the nature of generative AI — OpenAI's core business — that causes concern about the potential harms that could arise from lack of governance.

In the 18 months since ChatGPT first released, some of the potential harms AI can cause are already visible, alongside potential benefits it may bring. At an enterprise level, AI can automate a wide range of functions and create entirely new revenue streams. It can solve intractable scientific problems and develop new materials with exotic properties. AI can also clone voices and avatars that fool face-recognition and voice-recognition security systems. It is already being misused to run scams, and spread false political messages. Authoritarian regimes can misuse the same abilities to target dissidents, even as corporations use this capability to identify pizza-topping preferences. The other concerning trend is GenAI's propensity for throwing up fictional "facts" and fake citations on search prompts. As dependencies on the near-magical capabilities of GenAI increase, the need for more responsible development and deployment also grows. The governance void in OpenAI is therefore more concerning than it would be in a traditional company. Policymakers will have to look for effective ways to rein in the harmful potential of AI without retarding its beneficial aspects.

Catharsis against western media



BOOK REVIEW

TANVIR AEIJAZ

The idea that people cannot represent themselves but need representation is at the root of colonising the "other". The western style of narration — what Denys Hay calls the "idea of Europe" — posits the western-white-world as superior to the culture and politics of the rest of the world. The English philosopher J S Mill, one of the West's foremost liberal-cultural heroes, clarified that the views in his books *On Liberty* and *Representative Government* were meant not for India (he worked in the India Office for years) because he considered Indians civilisationally inferior. For the West, India's otherness is an ontological category to be explored. For India, this western exploration needs to

be critically assessed, perhaps from the lens of Orientalism. In *Western Media Narratives on India* author Umesh Upadhyay makes an effort in this direction.

Mr Upadhyay attempts to deconstruct the cultural significations of western media on Indian ideas, leaders and histories and the consequent development of nuanced configurations of power dynamics. His core argument is that the western media is ideologically and politically driven to maintain the hegemony of the western white world. The book suggests that modern media in the West since its inception trains journalists to colonise minds and institutions of the non-western world.

In the colonial era, explorer-reporters from the West, the author says, worked largely to fulfil the imperial power's evangelical (also proselytising) and explorative agendas. They considered India a "dark" land, much in need of "enlightenment" and "progress" in the western sense, and spread Hinduphobia, as is seen in the writings of American religious scholar Stephen

Prothero that "actual Hinduism is not about mystical union with God but about public prostitution, idol worship, anti-social ascetics, child brides and the caste system".

At the international level, the emergence of global news agencies, such as *Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *Agence France-Presse* and *United Press International*, virtually led to the cartelisation of news in order to secure control of information and news flow across the globe. These agencies, the author contends, are part of the market-driven western ecosystem sustaining the international power equilibrium.

On perceptions built by the western media on India, the author believes that all Indian leaders, from Mahatma Gandhi to Narendra Modi, including Patel, Ambedkar, Nehru, Indira and Vajpayee, were targeted and maligned by the "foreign media". Ambedkar once wrote to Patel and Nehru that "The press [read English press] has never been kind to me. It has always done its best to twist facts and phrases, take them out of their context, and pervert the

sense of anything I have said."

After independence, India's leaders seemed to be at the receiving end of the information war. Western news agencies contrived to create a dominant anti-Indian narrative, usually getting support from debates in rarefied academic circles, NGOs, and international agencies. Mr Upadhyay reminds us of President Nixon and National Security Advisor Kissinger's invective against Indira Gandhi. The western media, instead of condemning the abuse, focused on Kissinger's apology.

The author focuses on two events to substantiate his argument that western media patronises India to secure its global left-liberal agenda. One is the response to Indian space explorations, particularly Mangalyaan and Chandrayaan, and the second is the Covid-19 crisis. The author believes that the western world is threatened by the low-cost-high-output model of Indian space research missions. Isro is, therefore, critiqued by western media not only because it gives western agencies in the global satellite



WESTERN MEDIA NARRATIVES ON INDIA: From Gandhi to Modi
Author: U Upadhyay
Publisher: Rupa
Pages: 164
Price: ₹495

missing stories of courage and sacrifice of Indians during the pandemic. In the concluding chapter, Mr Upadhyay laments that the western media narrative on India needlessly bolsters the colonisation of the Indian mind, a new form of cultural imperialism.

Critically speaking, the book appears to be a rhetorical catharsis against the western media. We know that the western

media, or for that matter any media, is not a homogeneous category. To accuse all of them of conspiring against India — especially given the competitive environment in which they operate — amounts to missing the wood for the trees. It is true that globalised media networks impact the formulation of foreign and domestic policies, but it is also true that the media today is constantly under public scrutiny for its veracity and ethics. The mainstream media is under tremendous pressure to distinguish itself from deep fakes and strives to rescue itself from the crisis of credibility at any cost. Being a journalist himself, the author falls prey to what may be termed "sensationalised watchdogism". If Orientalism is the trope of the book, though loosely connected, then the author needs to engage with the mutual ties engendered by the influences of ideas, institutions and initiatives between the West and India. The book, nevertheless, makes for interesting reading for those imbued with ideas of hyper-nationalism and populism.

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Unlocking India's decadal growth

Sustained high growth will need hard reforms



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The political outcomes of the 2024 general election are unlikely to affect the near-term macroeconomic outlook. However, the hard policy choices embedded in alternative policy visions and reform agendas might lead to very different economic profiles over the medium to long term.

While the external environment still seems unsettled and volatile, the large G7 economies appear to be moving towards a "soft landing" to varying degrees. Hence, the policy response will become more conducive to growth, gradually lowering interest rates. This bodes well for emerging markets, with a "risk-on" investor sentiment attracting more capital inflows.

In this context, the domestic macroeconomic environment remains robust, with nowcasting metrics indicating continuing strong demand. Financial year 2023-23 (FY24) growth is expected to print close to 8 per cent, and the Reserve Bank of India's FY25 growth forecast of 7 per cent remains eminently feasible. A large part of investor confidence in India is due to the demonstrated fiscal discipline by the Centre, in coordination with the calibrated monetary policy response, which is perhaps the best executed and most agile in the world.

On domestic consumption, Q4FY24 results of consumer companies point to improving rural demand, further reinforced by the predicted normal rains. While consumption import demand is likely to remain robust, India's current account is unlikely to be adversely impacted, with the deficit increasing to maybe 1.2 per cent of FY25 gross domestic product (GDP) from last year's expected 1 per cent. Inflation, particularly non-food and fuel (i.e core inflation), is falling and the headline rate might be expected to move towards the 4 per cent target towards the end of FY25, thereby allowing a relaxation of monetary policy. Bank credit flow to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has remained

strong, growing 20.1 per cent year-on-year (YoY) as of March 24, 2024. Loan disbursements by non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) for the relevant MSME borrowing requirements had slowed marginally over the first nine months of FY24, but still remain healthy.

However, despite the economic success of the past few years, sustaining a 7 per cent-plus growth for 10 years will not be easy and will require multiple enablers operating synchronously. Sequencing and coordination of reforms will be key to designing feedback loops into other processes, mutually reinforcing the overall agenda. A major constraint is resources availability, which will force choices among competing objectives, necessitating difficult economic trade-offs.

An expected private corporate capex upcycle, given falling borrowing costs, deleveraged balance sheets, and expected consumption demand will augment the public sector. Enormous investments will be needed for the ambitious transition to the net-zero carbon goal by 2070, with a need to access global capital pools.

Yet, economic weaknesses remain. Policy and regulatory enablers will need to address structural deficiencies. Unemployment, especially amongst the youth, is the most pressing problem and will only get exacerbated by ongoing technological advances. The quality of jobs is as important as their availability. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data for Q4FY24 shows that even in urban areas, only 47.4 per cent of jobs were salaried or regular wage positions, while 40.2 per cent were self-employed, and 12.5 per cent were casual labour. The share of salaried workers is likely much lower in rural areas.

One channel for mitigating this problem and boosting jobs is to refocus policy attention on the micro and small segments of the MSME sector. The data, especially regarding the size and other metrics of this segment, are woefully outdated. The last economic



SAUGATA BHATTACHARYA

How young India views jobs and work

This election season has seen a lot of heated debate around unemployment, especially how the youth are distressed by the lack of jobs.

An interesting question to ask is: How do the affected parties — the youth themselves — see the job situation through the prism of their life and world view? What do they think and feel about it? Are they angry and incensed? Resigned and defeated? Wary and anxious? Or NOTA on all these feelings?

As with last month's column ("How Young India views the world and polls"), this piece is also based on the findings of the ethnographic study, *Drivers of Destiny*, the details of which were discussed in the previous column. The segment of youth studied was designed to be representative of the "leading edge" of "middle India" — college-educated individuals (from a variety of colleges and courses), residing in urban areas (comprising large and small towns across India), and belonging to the lower middle and middle-income groups. This does not equate to the popular perception of "middle class", which actually denotes the richest 40 per cent of Indian households). Many in this group were first-generation college goers in their families. This segment represents "emerging India", "aspirational India", and using the India 1-2-3 framework of retail entrepreneur Kishore Biyani, not quite India 2 but almost there — that is, not privileged enough to access the networks of India 1, but not poor enough to be unaware or unable to strive for opportunities out there.

The headline is that this "bellwether" swathe of young India is not deeply distraught or feeling angry or hopeless about the lack of jobs. It appears to be a wholly different India compared to the one portrayed by Bachchan's angry young man in the Bollywood movies of the 1970s, or the young people of *Mere Apne* frittering

away their lives waiting for someone to employ them.

First of all, in keeping with the mostly self-employed "own account worker", or gig working population that we have become, the word they use is "*kaam*" (work) not "*naukri*" (employment). There is definite awareness that work is hard to find and not easily available without effort. There is a constant striving to look for and find work and this is a big theme of their lives that comes through loud and clear. They also say "we are trying hard, it is difficult (*mushkil*), but working is a must".

However, interestingly, the ethnographers did not hear this phrased as a "problem". There was, typically, a portfolio of work and a constant churn in that portfolio depending on what showed up next (horrific attrition rates in many sectors are probably a result of this).

However, despite this short-term view of work, there is a significant amount of hopefulness that better things will happen for them. This optimism is fuelled by selective perception from the hyperactive information environment they live in, coupled with the flip side of selective

denial. In the last column, we pointed out the narrow, parochial lens of "me, my surroundings, my life" through which they view the world. Through this lens, the view seems to be "I am ok, I can do it". There is a surprising amount of resilience and openness to try. "I will try this, if it doesn't work or I can't succeed, I will try something else".

Their internet- and social media-embraced lives are continuously inundated with information. There are multiple discourses that they are engaged with on how to be successful (YouTube is full of them) and social media plays a huge influencing role in showing role models who have turned their passion into income streams. All this causes a considerable amount of

census was in 2013; and the Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises was in 2016. Other surveys provide a fragmented look at establishments, employment and economic activity. A combination of increased access to credit, government procurement support, skilling and apprenticeships, comprehensive insurance coverage, marketing support (e.g., via Open Network for Digital Commerce), export opportunities, among other steps, is crucial for a vibrant MSME ecosystem.

Intertwined with MSME growth is the need to boost exports, both merchandise and services. India's ambitious goal of achieving \$1 trillion in merchandise exports by 2030 implies an annual growth rate of 15 per cent (FY24 exports were about \$435 billion) and will need a multi-pronged approach to enhance markets access, including tapping into new, less penetrated markets, boosted by new free-trade and investment agreements. India will also need to integrate even more substantially into the global supply and value chains. Facilitating the scale-up of labour-intensive job-creating enterprises needs equal priority. Services exports, especially attracting more global capability centres (GCCs), provide an opportunity not just to increase integration with the global economy, but also to go up the value chain, e.g., leading edge research and design capabilities.

This ambitious \$1 trillion merchandise export target suggests that imports will exceed \$1.5 trillion. Efficiently transporting goods of this magnitude will require world-class logistics infrastructure designed for multimodality. Port terminal capacities with connectivity to hinterlands will need to be upgraded. While the government has made significant strides in improving transport and logistics systems, key initiatives like Gati Shakti and Bharatmala will need to be scaled up. Of particular importance will be the operations of the two dedicated rail freight corridors currently approaching completion and the implementation of others in high-density freight routes.

In the longer term, the government has to lead multiple structural transformations, which are crucial for the growth in productivity for sustained growth. Globally, productivity growth has largely emanated from urban agglomerations. Urbanisation in India has been one of the weaker stories, with the share of urban population rising from around 31.6 per cent in 2012 to 35.9 per cent in 2022. China's urban population, over this period, had moved up from 53.1 per cent to 64.7 per cent (up from 19.4 per cent in 1980, roughly the same level as India's then). Land availability is a significant constraint on urbanisation in India, but better road, rail and metro connectivity is pushing out the boundaries of peri-urban habitations. An earlier initiative, Providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas (PURA), merits revisiting.

Finally, the "last mile" is critical for efficiently implementing the reforms needed to sustain the high growth necessary for transitioning to an upper middle-income economy. This will require intense coordination among the Centre, states and local bodies in the true spirit of federalism.

The writer is an economist



OPINION

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{ OUR TAKE }

The politics of regional pride

Politicians should refrain from promoting xenophobic narratives in campaigns

The Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) leadership has made Odia *ashmita* (pride) the focus of its electoral campaign in Odisha, which is voting also to elect a new legislative assembly. In the party’s crosshairs is VK Pandian, chief aide and possible successor of chief minister (CM) Naveen Patnaik. From Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Union home minister Amit Shah to Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma to former MP Baijayant Panda, a clutch of BJP leaders have targeted Pandian’s ethnic origins to press the claim that their party wants to uphold Odia pride, which, according to them, will be tarnished if a non-Odia becomes the CM. Some, including Modi, have also hinted darkly at a conspiracy behind Patnaik’s ill-health.

It is understandable, even if a tad ironic, that the BJP, which speaks for unitarian politics, has picked Odia pride as a campaign theme, just as it is that conspiracy theories about the power behind the throne do the rounds during a bitter election campaign. Regional pride is a powerful strand in electoral politics, particularly in states formed around linguistic identity. Politics in Odisha has always had a regional element though Odia subnationalism has never been its pivot.

The problem is that the BJP’s framing of Odia pride borders on xenophobia, with leaders targeting the Tamil origins of Pandian, an Indian Administrative Service officer who served in Odisha for over two decades before taking voluntary retirement. Speaking at a public meeting on Tuesday, Shah said, “Naveen *babu* is trying to impose a Tamil CM on the people”. Earlier, Modi told a rally that a handful of “corrupt persons” had taken control of Patnaik’s office and residence and claimed that the missing key of Puri Jagannath temple’s treasure trove had been sent to Tamil Nadu. It predictably drew an angry response from politicians in Tamil Nadu.

These dog whistles don’t augur well for national integration or help nurture an inclusive national identity. Linguistic subnationalism has coexisted within the rubric of a broader Indian identity. States have been mostly welcoming of talent and labour, with demand regulating the flow rather than notions of ethnicity or regionalism. Tamil Nadu, for instance, has even seen politicians with non-Tamil origins rise to the office of CM by espousing Dravidian identity politics. Here linguistic pride was reimagined to privilege how a person relates to the people or the land she seeks to serve over where she was born. In fact, this is how politics has evolved in modern societies. Our political leaders must refrain from pushing narratives that encourage xenophobia. They may see it as a mere electoral tactic, but such narratives may linger and damage the national fabric.

Cyclone Remal has a warning for Northeast

Cyclone Remal carries a warning about the future. Remal, after its landfall over the West Bengal-Bangladesh coast on Sunday, turned into a cyclonic storm and battered large parts of India’s Northeast killing at least 32 persons. The northeastern states are accustomed to heavy rains and floods, but cyclonic storms are rare in the region. However, at a time of major shifts in weather patterns, inevitable in the time of climate crisis, such unexpected events may become more the norm than the exception.

Remal’s impact was severe in the Northeast because of its unusual trajectory. It developed over east central Bay of Bengal on Saturday (May 25) evening and intensified into a severe cyclonic storm on Sunday morning over the north Bay of Bengal, with wind speeds clocking over 100 kmph. The bay was unusually warm with some parts recording a temperature of 32 degrees Celsius (warm for water) which contributed to the intensity of the cyclone. A severe cyclone will rapidly weaken after it interacts with land, but Remal maintained its intensity as it moved to the northeast, causing unprecedented heavy rainfall, landslides, mudslides and flooding in that region.

The northeastern states are experiencing long dry spells interspersed by extreme rainfall events. Rainfall over northeast is on a decline while the relatively arid western India is recording higher rainfall due to a shift in monsoon behaviour — all six northeastern states reported 30% to 60% rain deficiency between March 1 and May 28. These states have also lost significant forest cover. Clearly, there is an urgent need to rehaul policies and staunch human interventions that disturb the region’s ecology. Improved land-use plans, mapping of landslide-prone regions, and regulating logging and mining can help the region prepare for exceptional weather events.

Why are there fewer Muslim candidates?

Issues of Muslim representation and Muslim exclusion should not be mixed up

The significant decline in the number of Muslim candidates in this Lok Sabha election underlines two interesting trajectories of Indian electoral politics.

First, political parties, it seems, have become truly professional and the idea of winnability has been accepted as an unwritten norm of electoral engagement. The ticket distribution mechanism is no longer guided by any ideological commitment. Instead, caste/religious configuration at the constituency level is taken as a point of reference to identify suitable candidates. It has become practically difficult for any serious regional and national party to give a ticket to a Muslim candidate only for the sake of political correctness. In fact, Muslim candidates are fielded tactically to divide votes in Muslim-majority constituencies to create a winnable balance.

Second, the emergence of Hindutva-driven nationalism as the dominant narrative of politics has forced the non-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) parties to avoid any direct reference to Muslim identity, especially in political terms. The BJP has been successful so far in creating a popular perception that Muslims have been appeased by Opposition parties in the past and that has undermined Hindu interests. Even the question of socio-economic backwardness of Muslims has become a communal issue. Against this backdrop, no party would like to be recognised as “pro-

Muslim”.

These practical aspects of electoral politics, however, should not be over-emphasised. Muslim political representation is a multifaceted phenomenon, which cannot merely be understood by “counting numbers”. One must pay attention to the sociological diversity of Muslims as well as the legal-constitutional framework to work out a possible explanation for the political marginalisation of Muslims in contemporary India.

The idea of political representation in the Indian context rests on two considerations: The composition of the “community” that claims representation and the institutional architecture where representation is sought. The post-colonial State under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru was clear about this. It was keen to get rid of the communal politics that had led to Partition while recognising and protecting Muslims as a constitutional minority.

An unwritten norm of politics was evolved to deal with this seemingly conflicting issue. A secular conception of representation was established to define an imagined political community of citizens as “voters”. The Representation of People Act 1951 says religion must be separated from electoral processes. This secular imagination of voters created a possibility, at least theoretically, that Muslim voters are not expected to vote only for Muslim candidates. In other words, the Nehruvian State strongly discouraged any kind of separate Muslim representation in elected legislative bodies.

This does not mean, however, that

collective Muslim interests were ignored. Two important mechanisms were adopted to recognise the Muslim presence in secular India. First, the Rajya Sabha and state legislative councils were recognised as possible avenues to induct Muslim leaders into legislative bodies. This became an accepted practice for the entire political spectrum in later years. In fact, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and BJP also used the Rajya Sabha route to accommodate their Muslim leaders until recently. Second, Muslim presence was appreciated as an inseparable aspect of secular Indian culture. It went well with the provision of minority rights given in the Constitution. The State evoked Muslim culture and heritage to represent the secular ethos of the country.

The equation between a denial of separate Muslim representation in elected bodies and the portrayal of positive Muslim presence in public life was very delicate. Political parties were guided by electoral calculations and it was inevitable they would evoke collective Muslim interests as an electoral issue. This is exactly what happened after the death of Nehru. Indira Gandhi began a new active politics of religion, which completely disregarded the subtle balance between Muslim representation and Muslim presence.

The debate on Muslim representation found a new lease of life after the publication of the Sachar Commission report in 2006. This was a completely different context. Muslim exclusion and backwardness emerged as acceptable policy issues, while the template of social inclusion was the guiding narra-



Hilal Ahmed



Muslim political representation is a multifaceted phenomenon

AP

tive of electoral politics. The intermixing of Muslim inclusion and Muslim representation created an impression that constitutional secularism is all about protecting a separate Muslim political identity. This unclear position strengthened the Hindutva critique that any discussion on Muslim backwardness and inclusion would eventually lead to separatism. The BJP’s electoral campaign in 2024 is clearly a manifestation of this line of reasoning.

The question arises: How should we talk about Muslim political representation, especially now when Muslim identity has become a political problem even for non-BJP parties?

I propose a different framework to deal with it. First, there is a need to democratise the idea of representation itself. Any discussion on Muslim representation should acknowledge the concerns and issues of Muslim Dalits, Muslim women, and poor Muslims. In other words, Muslim sociological diversity must be accepted as a principled position. The contribution of Pasmanda politics is very significant in this regard.

Second, the democratisation of the wider institutional apparatus. We should not only look at Parliament and state assemblies as possible sites to evaluate Muslim representation. Instead, we must pay attention to the internal mak-

ing of political parties to assess their inclusive character. Do they have any set mechanism to include marginalised groups, in this case, Muslims? How do they decide candidates to contest polls? Do they have regular internal party elections? These questions are very crucial because political parties have become highly centralised and there is no discussion on their democratic and secular credentials.

Finally, we must adhere to the constitutional principle of democratic secularisation. India’s Constitution envisages a political culture where the pain, suffering, and marginalisation of a group should become serious concerns for the entire society. This is exactly what Mahatma Gandhi argues on the minority-majority question. Our political history shows how non-Muslim leaders have stood for Muslim concerns and anxieties until recently. This healthy tradition should be further strengthened. Common Muslims, we must remember, do not necessarily want to be represented only by Muslim MPs and MLAs. However, they would like to be heard and recognised as dignified citizens as well as Muslims.

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Elections in Bengal are all but bipolar contests

On June 1, West Bengal will see its last round of electoral jousting, with the conclusion of the last phase of the Lok Sabha polls. Chief minister and Trinamool Congress (TMC) boss Mamata Banerjee set off febrile speculations on May 15 when she reportedly said that she would decisively help the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) form a government, but from outside. She also said her assistance would not extend to the Congress and Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Bengal because they were aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

This seemed to be a restatement of a much-iterated position, especially in the wake of her decision to fly solo in Bengal. Apportioning responsibility for the collapse of negotiations on seat-sharing between the TMC and Congress is futile. It should suffice to note that the corrosively inimical relationship between Banerjee and West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPC) president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury left a meaningful deal dead in the water from the get-go.

Banerjee clarified the very next day that she hadn’t meant that she would not be part of INDIA, which, she said, had been created by her. INDIA would form the government after the election, she said, and the TMC would be a part of it. In fact, she said, in a highly polemical vein, the TMC was the INDIA bloc in Bengal, while the Congress and Left weren’t since they’d arrived at their own understanding on the sidelines, as it were. Banerjee had just been firing a fresh salvo at her bête noire.

Chowdhury returned fire, saying she could even tie up with the BJP after the elections. The fallout singed the Congress, however. And the blame lies squarely on the shoulders of the party’s high command. On May 18, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said Chowdhury would have to toe the party line on the INDIA bloc or leave the party. The TMC, he said, was a part of the INDIA coalition and it was not for Chowdhury to decide on who was part of the coalition of the willing; the high command would. Chowdhury hit back, saying he would not cosy up to anyone “decimating” the party in the state. He repeated his charge that the TMC and BJP were colluding to make the Bengal election bipolar. At the same time, he reminded Kharge that as a member of the All India Congress Committee and Working Committee, he was also a part of the high command. The intra-party spat escalated the next day. Though attempts were made to smoothen the wrinkles, Chowdhury remained unrepentant. Since then the party leadership has spoken in two voices. Kharge himself called Chowdhury a “combative soldier”, in a placatory gesture. But general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal was not impressed, indirectly hinting at

disciplinary measures.

The episode once again underlines the Congress high command’s vacillatory approach to conflict resolution, especially when it comes to dealing with regional party bosses, though Chowdhury does not exactly qualify as that. If the high command wanted to accommodate the TMC fully by concluding a seat deal in Bengal, clearly it had to remove Chowdhury from the position of WBPC president. Someone like Pradip Bhattacharya, the congenial party candidate for the Kolkata Uttar constituency, who has a good equation with Banerjee, could have been tasked with the negotiations.

The failure to reach an agreement is likely to hurt both parties in the two seats in Malda district and the TMC in Raiganj (Uttar Dinajpur) and Balurghat (Dakshin Dinajpur). But, on the whole, it’s the TMC that has its nose ahead in Bengal. Obviously, Banerjee is more concerned with stopping the BJP in its tracks than devoting a lot of time to Chowdhury and Left leaders.

In the contest between the TMC and the BJP, some things look to be helping the TMC. The BJP seems to be over-reliant on star campaigners from out of state. Conspicuous by their absence outside their patches are leaders of the state BJP. Those who are contesting are tied to their constituencies. Only leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, Suwendu Adhikari, has been seen campaigning statewide.

This tactic came a cropper during the 2021 elections partly because central leaders found it hard to connect with the Bengal electorate, the language barrier being the most obvious point of disconnect. It also gave traction to the TMC charge that the BJP was a party of outsiders.

In a roadshow in Kolkata on May 28, Prime Minister Narendra Modi tried to address the problem of disconnection by making pit stops at three culturally salient destinations – the most important being Swami Vivekananda’s house. He targeted the TMC for its “attacks” on the Ramakrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha and ISKCON.

But the BJP’s nomination process was slow. Additionally, its choice of candidates seems in some cases to be inexplicable, especially when winning candidates have been shuffled around. Moving Dilip Ghosh from Medinipur to Bardhaman-Durgapur and SS Ahluwalia from there to Asansol doesn’t exactly sound like a plan. Replacing Ghosh with Asansol South MLA Agnimitra Paul is even less comprehensible. Putting up weak candidates in Diamond Harbour (against de facto TMC number two Abhishek Banerjee) and Jadavpur, a TMC bastion, is not a good look.

Nevertheless, Kharge probably realises something Chowdhury won’t admit; the elections in Bengal are all but bipolar, with two relatively well-matched opponents coming toe to toe. The margins are thin in many constituencies and what may decide keen contests is how Sandeshkhali and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, play out. The latter is most relevant in North Bengal, Nadia and North 24 Parganas.

In the current circumstances, both sides could settle for a situation as it exists now.

Suhit K Sen is an author and political commentator based in Kolkata. The views expressed are personal



Suhit K Sen

{ THABO MBEKI } FORMER PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA

There are too many challenges in South Africa. So, let’s go and vote, afterwards to say: What do we do with this South Africa of ours?

On the South African elections held on Wednesday

Chabahar is a metaphor for strategic autonomy

India’s declaration of a day-long State mourning and the lowering of the national flag to half-mast to commemorate the unexpected deaths of Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was a rare gesture. In recent years, such honour was accorded by India when Sultan Qaboos of Oman and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom passed. The symbolic respect accorded to Raisi was a clear recognition of Iran as a valued partner.

India recently signed a 10-year contract to operate the Chabahar port in Iran and further expand its investments in this strategic outpost on the Gulf of Oman. It was a bold signal from New Delhi that it will forge ahead in pursuit of its long-term national interests despite geopolitical headwinds. Given the extreme tensions flaring up between Iran and its regional rivals, India’s move carried risks but demonstrated its firm determination to manage its multiple strategic partnerships and extract the most from all of them.

India decided to double down on its stakes in Chabahar at a time when Iran has been embroiled in a near-warlike confrontation with Israel. Tehran and Tel Aviv have crossed previous red lines and engaged in direct missile and drone attacks against each other’s territories, and the two antagonists have upped their proxy wars in the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. Israel has indicated unambiguously that every sensitive critical infrastructure installation belonging to Iran is in its crosshairs.

But even as the gloves have come off in the undeclared Iran-Israel war, India’s assets in Chabahar are not likely to be directly imperilled. This is because India has a robust strategic partnership with Israel and Tel Aviv does understand New Delhi’s compulsions and motivations for developing Chabahar, which doesn’t conflict with Israeli interests. Container bulk cargo shipments to and from Chabahar are helping to reify India’s core vision of bypassing Pakistan as a land transit country and creating alternative multi-modal pathways for two-way trade among India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

With the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) agreement also having ambitious plans for transit via the Gulf of Oman up to the port of Haifa in Israel, India is co-creating a wide-ranging trans-regional connectivity architecture as it seeks to regain its place as a major commercial power across and beyond the Indian Ocean. Due to regional enmities and sen-

stivities in West Asia, Chabahar is not formally integrated into the IMEC. But pivotal strategic partners of India like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who are integral to IMEC, are not averse to pragmatically engaging with Iran. Jeopardising India’s vantage point in Chabahar is in the interests of Pakistan — whose tensions with Iran have been rising — and China, which has built and runs the Gwadar port on Pakistan’s southwestern coast close to Chabahar. But Israel and Gulf countries are not inclined to throw a spanner in the works of India’s presence in Chabahar.

The other risk factor that India has to reckon with when it comes to deepening its strategic partnership with Iran is the shift in the foreign policy priorities of the United States (US). Due to its opposition to American preferences, Iran has the distinction of being one of the most sanctioned countries in the world. India was forced to scale down its imports of Iranian oil since 2019 due to tough sanctions imposed by Washington DC and the resultant difficulties in arranging shipping, insurance and payments.

Yet, it is noteworthy that India negotiated with the US to secure a carve-out for its Chabahar investments from the “maximum pressure” American sanctions campaign against Iran. As India’s “comprehensive global strategic partner”, the US has been made to understand that India’s rise rests on its expanded footprint across both sides of the Indo-Pacific. For stabilising and moderating Afghanistan and for checking the Chinese juggernaut in West Asia and Eurasia, India must have the freedom to manoeuvre and gain access to strategic locations such as the Gulf of Oman.

Just as India has not buckled under western pressure on the question of sanctions against Russia, insulating itself from western pressures over Iran is a litmus test of its success in juggling its multiple strategic partnerships and proving its indispensability to all sides. Chabahar is more than a metaphor for India’s strategic autonomy. It augurs India’s rise as a leading power that can persuade or compel other countries to accommodate its national interests. The departures of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian will not alter the basic alignment of national interests between India and Iran, and New Delhi will look to consolidate this partnership come what may.

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Sreeram Chaulia



WORDLY WISE
THE BEST WAY TO EXECUTE FRENCH COOKING
IS TO GET GOOD AND LOADED AND WHACK
THE HELL OUT OF A CHICKEN. — JULIA CHILD

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

NETANYAHU’S WAR

His government’s actions flout principles of justice and humanity, apart from isolating Israel

AT THE TIME, it had seemed the March 25 UN Security Council resolution on Gaza would mark a turning point. The demand for a humanitarian ceasefire was not vetoed by the US — it had nixed three such resolutions till then — which signaled that Washington’s support for the Benjamin Netanyahu government was not limitless. That perception was strengthened earlier this month when President Joe Biden drew a “red line” around Rafah, saying that a ground offensive against the southernmost city in Gaza would lead to the US stopping its arms supply to Israel. But when the red line was breached, it was moved: Israel bombed a shelter for refugees, killing 45 people, on Sunday and the White House said that this did not constitute a violation. Yet, it would be a mistake for Tel Aviv to confuse this apparently long rope for impunity. The October 7 attacks by Hamas generated global sympathy for it, but the thousands of civilian deaths, and mass displacement that followed, is increasingly isolating it from the global community.

Sunday night’s attack was gruesome even in a conflict that has brutalised sensitivities. Netanyahu’s claim that the attack was a “mishap” cuts little ice. The hard, maximalist position taken by the Netanyahu government — denying a two-state solution in principle as well as refusing to pause the attacks — is isolating Israel globally. His failure to bring back the remaining hostages, or capture the Hamas leadership, has made him unpopular at home. In fact, before the current conflict, Israel was expanding its ties with moderate states in the region through the Abraham Accords. It was also an important node in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor announced at the G20 summit in New Delhi last year. These multilateral arrangements were the first step in turning the Middle East into a zone of connectivity and trade, not conflict. Netanyahu’s actions, the expansion of the conflict to the Red Sea and with Iran, have turned the clock back.

It is important to remember the Netanyahu government was facing a crisis of popularity and legitimacy before October 7, 2023. It had lost allies and there were massive protests over the government’s attempted judicial “reforms”. The PM himself faces corruption charges. Cynics might well believe that the prolonged conflict is a bid at political self-preservation. This politics through war, however, is hurting Israel’s interests internationally. Earlier this week, Spain, Ireland and Norway recognised the Palestinian state; the International Court of Justice has admitted a case accusing Israel of genocide and there has been a request for arrest warrants for war crimes for Netanyahu and others at the International Criminal Court. Protests against the Netanyahu government’s actions in universities and beyond — including and especially in the US — mean that there is a domestic political cost to supporting Israel, especially relevant for the US in an election year. The Netanyahu government’s attacks on civilians and the refusal to allow a ceasefire for even humanitarian aid is a form of unconscionable collective punishment for October 7. It flies against the principles of justice and humanity, and harms and diminishes Israel.

BEFORE THE NEXT STORM

Rise of multi-hazard disasters calls for disaster resilient infrastructure, empowered disaster management agencies

THE CREATION of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) in 2005, prompted by the 1999 Odisha super cyclone and the 2004 tsunami, was a timely decision. Over the years, the NDMA has done commendable work in disaster mitigation, risk assessment and reduction, and post-disaster response, rescue and relief. It has also developed competencies in newer threats like heatwaves. Nearly every state now has a disaster management agency of its own, though some function less effectively than others. But the damage caused by landslides in the Northeast in the aftermath of cyclone Remal that hit the West Bengal coastline on Sunday night is the latest reminder of the urgent need to upgrade and overhaul the disaster management system.

The nature of disasters that the country faces has changed drastically in the last 20 years. Disasters, especially those that are a result of extreme weather events, have become more frequent and intense. Climate change has been playing an important role in exacerbating the impacts. Events that were not looked at as potential disasters earlier, like the summer heat, have emerged as new threats. The most worrying development has been the rise in what are known as multi-hazard disasters, one event triggering another, or a series of other disasters, the cascading impacts of which result in a destruction that is much higher in magnitude. Heavy rainfall leads to breach of glacial lakes and landslides in hilly areas which results in flash floods downstream. Or, extreme heatwave triggers largescale forest fires. The recent episode of landslides in the Northeastern region, which has claimed at least 30 lives, was a similar multi-hazard disaster. Cyclone Remal caused heavy rainfall in the area which triggered landslides at several locations.

Disaster management agencies need to be empowered to play a more pro-active role in dealing with these. More resources and capacity-building needs to flow in. There is little that can be done to prevent natural events, like extreme rainfall or cyclones or heatwaves. But man-made influences like unregulated construction can certainly be minimised. India is in the process of building infrastructure for its future. Resilience to disasters needs to be built into each of these. Old infrastructure also needs to be retrofitted. India has created an international organisation, the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), specifically to promote disaster resilient infrastructure worldwide. It would be helpful to create the right templates at home first.

HOLD THE STEAK

The Olympic Village restaurant wants to give French cuisine a vegetarian makeover. Is the land of foie gras prepared?

BROCCOLI IS NO replacement for beef, but as the Paris Olympics draw closer, the country best known for dishes like steak tartare, boeuf bourguignon and blanquette de veau, is preparing for a vegetarian makeover. The trigger: The Olympics planning committee’s goal to cut emissions by 50 per cent, which means that food with a heavy carbon footprint — like beef and veal — will be reduced to 40 per cent of the menu in the restaurant that will serve the over 15,000 athletes arriving in July.

Charles Guillo, the chef in charge, has spoken in interviews of his desire to break the “false stereotype... that French gastronomy is meat, meat and only meat”. While it is true that among the classic French dishes are some vegetarian ones — for example, ratatouille or soupe à l’oignon — vegetables, in general, are something of an after-thought. On this matter, France, with the highest per capita consumption of beef and veal in Europe, has fallen behind. Others like Scandinavian countries have been quicker to embrace a less meat-dependent diet. This applies as much to home cooking as it does to fine dining. Currently, there is only one Michelin-starred vegetarian restaurant in all of France and the one vegan restaurant that was awarded a star, closed down a year after winning the honour.

It’s not just cultural pride that has fueled a disregard for plant-forward cooking in France. For the last few years, the meat industry has warily watched the plant-based food industry grow and even gone to court to keep these products from using meat-based descriptions like “sausage”. Guillo and Tony Estangoet, head of the organising committee for the Games, have both spoken of the responsibility to “educate” the people about planet-friendly eating habits. But this may take more than one sporting event, even if it is the biggest in the world.



FAISAL DEVJI

CRITICS OF THE Joe Biden administration routinely contrast the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, accusing the US of double standards in condemning Russian, but not Israeli attacks on civilians. But what is striking about these conflicts is not how differently Washington has been handling them but how similarly. In both cases, America opted for war rather than negotiations, leading its Western allies in supplying arms, funding, and diplomatic cover to Ukraine and Israel. Despite the carnage, both wars have reached a stalemate and are unlikely to achieve any of Kyiv’s or Tel Aviv’s stated military aims of complete victory. What does this double failure say about the changing international order and its possible future?

Taken together, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza show up the radical insufficiency of the political categories we use to understand them. A narrative about the revival of Russian imperialism, for instance, is countered by one about Ukraine collaborating with NATO to diminish Moscow. Claims of Palestinian terrorism aided by Iran’s alleged mission to destroy Israel is countered by the latter’s politics of apartheid and settler colonialism. And, all sides accuse each other of genocide.

However, none of these storylines can account for the direction in which these wars are going. Nor can they explain why the US has chosen to deal with them in exactly the same way, despite their very different histories and places within American foreign policy.

The US has chosen to globalise these conflicts in the name of restricting their spread. It has done so by mobilising international support for Ukraine and Israel only to divide the world instead. Both Russia’s invasion and Hamas’s attack appeared to ignore the global contexts of these long-standing conflicts to focus on their regional dimension. Just as the Minsk Agreements do not now frame Russian policy on Ukraine, neither do the Abraham Accords define Arab views on Gaza. And the world’s divided response to these wars only consolidates their regional character, since countries refusing to follow American instruction consider neither to be a global threat. Only the West’s support of one party over another threatens to turn each into a global conflict.

Astonishing about this refusal, especially from countries in the so-called Global South, is how many of them are US or Western allies and even client states. Also notable is the fact that most do not phrase their choice in terms of siding with one party or another in the style of the Cold War. Turkey can be part of NATO

US response in Ukraine, Gaza exposes cracks in global order, move towards regionalisation of geopolitics

The fact that the US possesses no rival has regionalised geopolitics by removing the possibility of great-power competition from it. While we tend to date economic and cultural forms of globalisation to the end of the Cold War, this event paradoxically led to the collapse of global politics as well. With the world no longer divided into two blocs and a few non-aligned countries, regionalisation has emerged after the last American effort to re-globalise politics in the War on Terror. It has been focussed throughout on heading off all potential rivals and forestalling the emergence of another bipolar or even multipolar international order.

and sell drones to Ukraine while still refusing to sanction Russia. Similarly, it can oppose Israel’s war in Gaza while maintaining diplomatic (and until recently, trade) relations with it. Instead of seeing such behaviour as erratic and hypocritical, we should acknowledge that Turkey is one of many such state actors who seem to have brought neutrality back to geopolitics for the first time since it was banished during the War on Terror.

What is called neutrality in the case of Ukraine is manifested in calls for a ceasefire in the case of Gaza. In either case, the effect is to recognise and reinforce each war’s regional character and thus reduce its potential for expansion. But this can only happen at the expense of Ukraine as much as Israel, both of which would be forced to accommodate themselves to a new regional order. The irony of this for the latter, of course, is that the Abraham Accords were also meant to set up a regional order, but one in which Israel would be the linchpin. But such regionalisation would render the unipolar international order in which America conducts itself as a global power irrelevant. This explains why the US insists on re-globalising both conflicts by intervening and further militarising them. Defending Ukraine and Israel might be deeply-felt commitments, but they do not exhaust the meaning of such intervention.

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If geopolitics is not working in the way the West expected, it is because the rest of the world is moving in a different direction. The real threat to a unipolar international order comes not from a bipolar or multipolar future in which politics remains global, but from the latter’s collapse in the face of regionalisation.

Rather than seeking to replace the Cold War’s remaining pole in great-power competition, America’s rivals are trying to circumvent it without necessarily reducing it. They are treating it not as a model for their own future but as a remnant from the past. Whether or not any country entertains the ambition of succeeding the US, for the foreseeable future, its politics can only be one of evading the latter’s power.

Middle powers like China, Russia, India, and Brazil are all actors in regional political arenas and cannot project military force much beyond them. Most do not even exercise hegemony over their own neighbourhoods. China may be economically integrated in its region, but it only has North Korea, and occasionally, Pakistan as allies. India, similarly, finds itself in a largely hostile neighbourhood in which it lacks even economic integration. To escape the limits of its regional influence, India reaches out to powers outside it. Only Russia appears to enjoy some kind of regional hegemony in Central Asia and parts of the Caucasus and eastern Europe, serving as the poor cousin to US’s transatlantic hegemony over the West.

While the US has been focussed on a global threat to its unipolarity, the real danger it faces comes from the loss of global politics. This threat does not arise from isolationism but globalisation itself. It is because economic and technological relations have moved beyond the reach of states, as the failure of sanctions on Iran and Russia demonstrates, that politics can now become regional. The US’s response to this is to attempt their re-globalisation, but it can only do so by supporting war in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Its deployment of force to reestablish the *status quo ante*, however, has not succeeded and is doing little more than collapsing US hegemony and its global role in the international order.

The regionalisation of the international order does not mean it will be any more peaceful than the global one built to contain the Cold War. The task before the US today is to do what it has already done twice following each of the World Wars, and create a new international order founded on a balance of power. But this time that balance must be struck not between empires as with the League of Nations, nor between superpowers as with the United Nations, but among the regions and middle powers which now define geopolitics.

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D RAJA

IN THE LAST 10 years of the BJP’s misrule, our constitutional framework has come under unprecedented strain. After targeting our sense of belonging through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and distorting our shared history, the BJP is now bent on debasing the integrity of our institutions, including constitutional ones. Its assault on the electoral process is multifaceted, meant to undermine its integrity. Coupled with undermining institutions like the Parliament and state assemblies, this serves the purpose of eroding the foundations of our parliamentary democracy.

The BJP tried to corrupt the political arena through the now unconstitutional electoral bonds scheme. Next came “One nation, one election”, which dilutes the federal character of our republic and impedes the autonomy of both the voter’s franchise and the elected state governments. A more frontal attack on the integrity of elections came in the form of The CEC and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023, which gave the central government a majority vote in the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) was conceived as a strong, independent and permanent body deriving its authority directly

WHAT EC MUST GUARANTEE

Independence of crucial institutions is necessary to safeguard citizens’ interests

ECI holds a vast mandate and power when it comes to the conduct of free and fair elections. The extent of ECI’s power is such that it cancelled a by-election to the R K Nagar assembly constituency in Tamil Nadu in 2017 when it saw the electoral process being “seriously vitiated” by the use of money power. It is disheartening to see the same body behaving in the manner it has by neglecting serious violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) by leaders of the BJP. The BJP and PM Narendra Modi started their campaign by repeatedly invoking the Ram Temple issue but the ECI took no note of it. However, to the BJP’s great shock, people prioritised issues of livelihood like employment, price rise and the 10 years of BJP misrule etc. Their refusal to be swayed by the Ram Temple issue made the BJP and Modi desperate and they resorted to the only thing they know — polarisation. Overnight, the BJP dropped Modi’s guarantees and the Viskit Bharat rhetoric and started fuelling hatred and divisions. The PM openly made anti-minority remarks and baselessly claimed that the Opposition alliance will give wealth to Muslims if voted to power. These remarks not only violated the MCC but also the spirit of secularism and equality enshrined in the Constitution.

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I wrote to the CEC on April 23, seeking action against Modi and the BJP for violating the MCC. In response, the ECI sent a notice, not to Modi, who made the provocative remarks, but to BJP President JP Nadda, asking him to “bring to the notice of all your star campaigners to set high standards of political discourse and observe provisions of MCC in letter and spirit”. In the past, such notices and censures were issued directly to the campaigner who violated the MCC. Further, the ECI issued a similar notice to Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge.

The mandate of the people goes beyond changing the government — it is crucial to protect the character of our nation, which was built by the sacrifices of our freedom fighters. Ideals like equality, secularism, welfare, federalism and social justice are vital for progress. Independence and integrity of crucial institutions are necessary if citizens’ interests are to be safeguarded. Free and fair voting is the cornerstone of our democracy and the ECI is the instrument to ensure that right provided by the Constitution. As we see institutional erosion all around us, the ECI should serve the people according to its mandate.

The writer is General Secretary, CPI



MAY 30, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

2 BSF JAWANS KILLED

TERRORISTS KILLED SEVEN people, including two Border Security Force jawans, and injured seven persons in extremist activity in Punjab in the last 24 hours. The two BSF jawans and a civilian were killed when terrorists opened fire on a BSF picket in Tarn Taran. Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi expressed her unhappiness to the Punjab Governor B D Pande over the handling of the Punjab situation.

A DIPLOMATIC GAFFE

INDIA HAS CONVEYED to Bangladesh its “profound regret” over the violent incidents

at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, in which volunteers of the “Hindu Manch” damaged the mission building. Foreign Secretary M Rasgotra met the Bangladesh High Commissioner Air Marshal A K Khandekar and conveyed to him that the Indian government regretted the incident. Rasgotra assured him that full protection would be provided to the diplomatic mission.

RIOTS IN J&K

ONE PERSON WAS killed and one seriously injured when the police opened fire in Srinagar to quell violent mobs. Two persons

were injured in the firing. One of them succumbed to his injuries. The police resorted to firing when lathicharge and teargas failed to disperse the mob that set fire to the office of the deputy superintendent of police.

THACKERAY’S CLAIM

SHIV SENA CHIEF Bal Thackeray feels that if he is arrested on some criminal charges, it would only lead to “further chaos”. He said that if the government desired to take action, it could have done so immediately after his so-called provocative speech. The delayed action proved that the “government has wilted under communal pressure.”

THE IDEAS PAGE

The vacation red herring

Blaming court holidays for pendency distracts from the deeper structural problems that ail the judiciary



MAJA DARUWALA

AS WE BEGIN this summer's court break, the debate about how much time judges actually put in on the Bench has been rekindled by a casual remark from a member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, who said that judges work only for a few hours a day, take long vacations and need to modernise.

The question of whether judges sit for 200 days or 365 is a red herring. It spins court timings and vacations to mean "this is why there are arrears". It creates the impression that if judges stayed longer on their benches, instead of swanning off on holiday, arrears would magically disappear and all would be well. To respond by saying that judges are overburdened and need to blow off steam in fine holiday spots while litigants languish plays into a manufactured imagery of lack of accountability or discipline amongst a pampered privileged elite.

True, a few more weeks of active sittings or even uninterrupted court time is not a bad idea and will go some way towards placating those chafing under delays. But too many other things that have lain unattended at the door of both the judiciary and the executive, are more responsible for the problem of arrears than judges' vacations.

For one, there is the vexed question of too few judges. No state has its full complement of judges: Not in the high courts and not in our many lower courts. High court vacancies average 30 per cent but can touch nearly 50 per cent. Subordinate court vacancies average 22 per cent. But Bihar and Meghalaya clock in vacancies above 30 per cent — ongoing for over three years. According to the India Justice Report, as of June 2020, on average, a case remained pending in the subordinate courts for three years and in high courts, at 2022 figures, for five years.

Litigants want a quick resolution to their issues, but with pendency being what it is they can't hope to get it and overburdened judges can't give it.

Shortfall in judges is measured against "sanctioned" strength — the number designated as necessary, given the workload. However, as long ago as 1987, the 120th report of the Law Commission recommended there should be 50 judges per 10 lakh population. At just 15 judges per 10 lakh population nearly four decades later, even this hugely inadequate figure has not been reached. Meanwhile, each of India's BRICs partners has way more judges to serve their populations.

Several other factors contribute to the problem, including the types and complexity of cases each judge must deal with, and the stratagems used by lawyers to prolong trials for their clients' advantage. Courtrooms are being built, but are still in short supply and too many in use are sub-optimal. Nationally, support staff shortages average 26 per cent. One court clerk or one typist missing anywhere means delay becomes inevitable, however diligent the judge.

Quality deficits amplify structural inadequacies. Uneven acumen in both language and



C R Sasikumar

learning at the bar and the bench leads to endless procedural delays while the mismatch between proficiency of language, clarity of argument and final outcome opens the door to ever more appeals.

A permissive and perhaps collusive culture within the legal fraternity allows unjustified applications, endless adjournments and unmeritorious appeals to proliferate. It is routine for pleadings and paper books to grow into small mountains. So too with judgments, whose length may often be inverse to their learning. In all this, eventually, it is the dispensation of justice that suffers.

Meanwhile, the great hope of technology remains hostage to slow and uneven adoption, erratic electricity, uneven bandwidth and user resistance.

Solutions require state and central governments to come together, to at least attempt to find answers. A few are mentioned here.

Excessive government litigation presently accounts for roughly 50 per cent of the court load. Attempts to trim and rationalise this have been going on for a while. In the absence of comprehensive publicly available data, or cost-benefit analysis, it is hard to know whether they have led to any significant downsizing of the sprawling government docket or what incentives and disincentives would rationalise it.

Every new legislation adds its own slice of litigation. New bills rarely ever assess the additional load that will fall on the courts. The practice of assessing possible financial and time implications and putting this out to the public at the pre-legislative stage would, perhaps, lead to better-drafted laws and early plans being laid for better outcomes. Cleaning out outdated laws and procedures also helps to reduce cases.

Judges are trained to be adjudicators, not administrators. A permanent administrative secretariat headed by a qualified court manager within each court, on whom the senior judge can rely, has proved a winner in many jurisdictions abroad where court management is a specialised career option. Long-term court managers who can free the bench of many tedious tasks and a design for maximum efficiency are solutions worth universalising.

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On the quality side, there is a strong case to be made for higher standards being set at the entry level before anyone can grace a bench, whether high or low, or before being allowed to practise before a court. The growing number of appeals and admonitions meted out for ignoring procedure, not knowing the law and dressing up opinion as legal rationale says much more about the fault lines embedded in the system than about the individuals who have been allowed to run it.

Spending more money on justice delivery is, of course, a no-brainer but resource-strapped governments do not prioritise ramping up efficiencies in justice delivery. The India Justice Report estimates that the overall per capita spending on judiciary stands at less than Rs 150. It remains to be evaluated whether this subsistence-level budgeting is penny-wise or pound-foolish.

The eye-watering five million-plus cases pending have prompted all sorts of experiments and sudden ad hoc efforts: Compulsory pre-trial mediation, Lok Adalats, specialist courts, the winnowing out of petty cases, ironing out burdensome procedural bottlenecks as the apex court has done recently when it directed the electronic communication of bail orders directly to prisons; prioritising old cases and cases where delay will bring about loss of liberty and irreparable harm to one or other party, and ever more tribunals. Yet, too often, saddled with the same structural shortfalls, starved of money and manpower, heavy workloads and deficient domain knowledge, specialised efforts like consumer and POCOS courts limp along, while their own arrears end up in the same dire straits.

The rising tide of litigation is often cited as one more reason for inescapable delay. In a rule-of-law country, it is everyone's right to have their day in court. Across the world, as incomes and ownership rise and commerce and industry grow, recourse to formal systems of adjudication increases and must be welcomed because it signals trust in a robust system of conflict resolution. This is inevitable, foreseeable and with prudent planning — not finger-pointing — could be manageable.

The writer is editor-in-chief, India Justice Report

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"People of conscience in the East and West must unite to economically and militarily boycott Israel for its shameless spilling of Palestinian blood. If concrete steps are not taken, then we must await the next atrocity." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

Punjab, unlike other states

It has no alliances, no vote banks based on religion and caste. It has been known to resist a national electoral wave



PRAMOD KUMAR

PUNJAB HAS CARVED an electoral path of its own. Here, there are no alliances amongst political parties, no INDIA bloc and no NDA, no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste, even as there are the same tribes of party-hoppers and footloose voters. The national narrative of *Ram Mandir nirman*, Mandal, OBC reservation or apprehensions of subversion of the Constitution are hardly a part of the mainstream narrative in the state. It has a story of farmers' grievances, sharing of river waters, transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab, and Indo-Pak trade apart from issues of infrastructure development, quality education, drug de-addiction, and youth engagement. All these are being garnished with the incumbent AAP's Delhi Model of governance for the state.

Punjab has a rich history of political mergers, alliances and coalitions. The formation of such alliances goes back to colonial Punjab. Uneasy, but many times historically necessary alliances were arrived at. In reorganised Punjab, four post-election coalitions between 1967 and 1980, and three pre-election coalitions during 1997 and 2019 were formed between the BJP and Akali Dal. At the national level, however, the coalition became central to the putting together of the government in the period post-1989, with 1977 an exception.

Unlike many other states, Punjab has had no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste. These categories are intertwined and enmeshed. For instance, Scheduled Castes constitute more than 33 per cent of the total population and are segmented into Mazhabis, Chamars, Adharmis and Balmikis and are not represented by any caste-based party. The vote share of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has been continuously declining. It has come down from 8 per cent in 2004 to 3.53 per cent in 2012 and 2 per cent in 2019. Data shows that the majority of SC legislators have got elected from parties other than the BSP — around 16 per cent of the SC members between 1967 and 2022 belonged to the BJP, 28 per cent to the Akalis, 23 per cent to Congress.

Punjab does not prop up an exclusive Hindu vote bank. In the 2014 Parliament elections, the BJP could not garner votes of urban Hindus even when the Hindutva wave was sweeping other parts of the country. Reformism within Hindus was guided more by the search for an identity to defend their faith from Christian missionaries, Islam and the Sanatan orthodoxy. This can be attributed to the role played by religious reform movements, particularly Sikhism, Arya Samaj, and Brahma Samaj. Hindus have dominant traits of Sikhism, and a normative behaviour influenced by the Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharma both.

Thus, given that Punjab's electoral politics shows the blurring of religious and caste fault-lines, mobilising the people as part of exclusive categories, like Hindu traders or SCs, may not bring the desired electoral results.

There is a four-cornered contest as the political parties have not entered into alliances. Congress and the AAP decided to go solo after their alliance talks could not

reach fruition as the Punjab unit of Congress opposed it. It argued that an alliance with the AAP would negate the mandate of the people to perform the role of the opposition. In turn, it would help the Akalis to emerge as the main opposition and encash the anti-incumbency faced by the AAP government. It was argued by the Congress leadership that it would have been suicidal to barter its support base for a short-term advantage at the national level. In Punjab, Congress is the frontrunner in more than half of the constituencies.

The AAP created a new binary in the 2022 Assembly elections, that is, traditional parties versus the party for change. It clubbed all parties, ranging from Congress and Akalis to BJP, and branded them as corrupt. Now, after two years in power, the AAP in Punjab appears to have lost the plot. However, its performance in the ongoing polls will largely depend on its paternalistic welfarism, whereby freebies have been offered across the population. How far will the implementation of free electricity for all, upto 300 units, give dividends to AAP, is the question.

The Akalis and the BJP could not enter into an alliance as the Akali Dal insisted on conditions, including legal guarantees for MSP for crops and release of Sikh prisoners after completion of their jail terms.

The emergence of the regional space has been largely influenced by the farmers' protests, which acted as one of the filters for the alliance between the BJP and SAD. The BJP has to regionalise its agenda, as the narrative of Ram Mandir and its corporatised approach to agriculture may have implications for election outcomes. The Akalis have a regional agenda, with issues relating to federalism, Indo-Pak trade, crisis of agriculture and increasing youth unemployment. It may also be able to consolidate its panthic constituency.

The BJP does not have a Punjab-specific agenda, particularly for the Punjabi Hindus, who, unlike other minorities, do not suffer any sense of persecution or siege. Merely importing turbaned Sikh leaders may not transform it into a Punjab party. It has the advantage of having Sunil Jakhar as BJP state president, known for his sharp pro-Punjab positioning. But the non-fulfilment of promises of doubling the income of farmers and legalising MSPs has returned to haunt the BJP.

The absence of an alliance between the Akalis and the BJP may have provided fodder to the radicals. In this election, the fringe radicals are getting a notable response from the youth, mainly in Khadoor Sahib and Faridkot constituencies. Their main emphasis is on the denial of justice to the Bandi Sikhs (Sikh prisoners incarcerated in various cases for years), exodus of youth from Punjab and the migration to the state of labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

The mainstream political parties have allowed the fringe radicals to appropriate space in the religious or panthic constituency. The negation of the agenda of peace and communal harmony, and one-upmanship in power politics, has weakened the moderate space. This is disquieting.

The four-cornered contest between the Akalis, BJP, Congress and AAP will lead to a division of votes. The Congress appears to be the major beneficiary, followed by the AAP and the Akalis might be able to consolidate their support base. The BJP may, on limited seats, gain from this flux.

The writer is chairperson, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh



SEEMA MUNDOLI

In heat island, a green oasis

Parks provide respite in the summer. They must be made more accessible

OUR POPULAR IMAGINATION of parks is as spaces for rest and recreation. But in cities such as Bengaluru, they are also important from an ecology and equity perspective. It is, therefore, unfortunate that little attention is paid to these pockets of greenery that contribute to making life bearable in a rapidly concretising city. Equally concerning is that parks are becoming battlegrounds for determining who can access them, for what purposes and at what times of the day.

Cubbon Park and Lal Bagh are historical landmarks in the city. If Bengaluru can still cling to the moniker of "Garden City", it is owing to the continued existence of these parks. But scattered across neighbourhoods are also smaller parks in different shapes and sizes that are tucked away in quieter nooks or flanked by roads, houses, and shops. The tree cover is often a mix of native and exotic species with flowering species adding a splash of colour and canopies providing shade that sometimes extend across almost half an acre. In the better-maintained ones, we can see more footfall — mostly residents who live nearby and frequent the park for walks, the elderly conversing on the benches, pet owners walking their dogs, and children playing. More recently, open-air gyms with a variety of exercise machines have been introduced in these spaces as well.

Whatever the different spatial, ecological, or demographic dimensions, one common feature of most neighbourhood parks in Bengaluru is the timing. They remain

open only for a few hours in the morning and in the evening. For the rest of the day, the gates of these fenced parks remain firmly shut — and locked.

Urban Lab at the Centre for Science and Environment's recent report highlights how rising temperatures together with relative humidity pose a deadly combination in six megacities including Bengaluru. The city has seen of 0.5 degrees C increase in decadal ambient temperature, and relative humidity has marginally contributed to overall heat discomfort. Coupled with this is the urban heat island effect — the result of an increase in built-up areas because of urbanisation.

Temperatures in Bengaluru city have been breaking records this summer — going as high as 41.8 degrees C. While rainfall brought some relief last week, the days continue to be uncomfortably hot making parks scattered across the city appear like refreshing oases. In reality, however, they are more of a mirage because when the sun is at its peak, the parks remain closed denying access to people who desperately need the shade in the day.

These include the *pourakarmikas* who work in the sweltering heat to keep our city clean, the construction workers engaged in endless repair work on the roads, and gig workers who could do with a brief respite while rushing between deliveries. Heat risk and strokes can be debilitating, even fatal. Recognising this, the Labour Department of Kerala in April this year rescheduled work

timings banning any work in the open between 12 pm and 3 pm. But can a gig worker afford the luxury of working fewer hours?

Timing is not the only restriction. A common sight on entering many of these parks is a board prominently displayed with a list of prohibited activities. Some of them are understandable considering the park is a public space such as warnings against alcohol consumption, smoking, throwing plastic and other waste, and damaging trees. Others seem unreasonable such as prohibiting the plucking of flowers, sitting or walking on grass, or bringing in eatables. In some parks, perhaps because of the smaller size, the rules border on bizarre — such as children being prohibited from playing or riding a bicycle! Another issue that especially splits residents is regarding allowing entry to pets, especially dogs.

Parks are public spaces where urban residents from all walks of life can unwind and relax — potential places for social bonding among people. So we should be concerned that they are turning into mini battle-grounds instead.

We need to collectively rethink park use and access in Bengaluru — and reimagine them as multiuse green spaces accessed by different groups at different times of the day. Parks need protection from being converted to other forms of land use and from being increasingly concretised. Should the limited space in the neighbourhood park be retained as green cover to mitigate the impacts of rising temperatures and the urban heat island

effect? Or should the trees and plants be removed to accommodate exercise machines? Parks can be for recreation — walking, exercising or spending an evening with family. They are also ideal from an educational perspective for children, especially from schools in the neighbourhood who can learn about the natural world.

Even a small patch of green in their neighbourhood park is a perfect field site for observing biodiversity from insects to birds to mammals. Parks can be a refuge for urban residents from all walks of life. For office goers, they are a perfect spot to have lunch under the shade of a tree before heading back to a walled office. They provide succour for the city's vulnerable population such as the *pourakarmikas*, construction labour and gig workers giving them a respite, however brief, from the scorching heat while at work.

Getting different groups to agree on the use and maintenance of a park will not be easy. But we need to take the first step, however tiny, in making parks more accessible and inclusive, not to mention ecologically rich. The more people access parks with a sense of ownership, the more eyes on the park there will be which will in turn contribute to making them safer. But we also want these eyes to be kind, and inclusive, allowing different groups to access parks freely throughout the day.

The writer is faculty, Azim Premji University

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DIFFERENT TIME

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Sing a political song' (IE, May 29). The era of the Hindi film songs depicting the nation's popular mood, satirising politicians and taking the powers that be to account is long gone. The writers of songs used to be well-versed in the long tradition of defiant poetry in Urdu and Hindi. Poets like Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, Shakeel Badauni, Hasrat Jaipuri, Shailendra, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Neeraj were among those who enriched Hindi film songs. Closer to the common man, they translated his aspirations and frustrations well. The early decades of Independence were marked by socialism and patriotism. This is a far cry from today when any criticism of those in power is synonymous to sedition.

SH Quadri, Bikaner

ROSY PICTURE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Elections then and now' (IE, May 29). The article presents a rather rose-tinted view of past elections, implying that they were simpler and more straightforward com-

pared to the complexities of contemporary politics. However, this portrayal conveniently overlooks the significant flaws and challenges that existed during those times. The article downplays the seriousness of defections in current politics by suggesting that they are merely a part of the "winning strategy". In reality, defections undermine the democratic process.

Saurabh Shekhar, New Delhi

THE HEAT IS ON

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The heat stress'. The country has already far exceeded the normal week or two period of heatwaves it experiences, with temperatures breaching the 50 degree Celsius mark. India has national guidelines on heatwaves, explicitly laying out the roles and duties of the central and state government agencies, district administrations, local self-governments, NGOs, civil society organisations and other stakeholders. However, it is the responsibility of the states at the district magistrates' level to take measures to reduce loss of life due to heatwaves and maintain data on deaths.

Khokan Das, Kolkata



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Not just Delhi: temperature records are tumbling across the world

AMITABH SINHA
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

THE EXTREMELY high temperatures recorded in New Delhi in the last two days are extraordinary. But they are in keeping with the global trend in the last couple of years that has seen record-breaking temperatures being reported from several locations across the world.

For example, the United Kingdom crossed 40 degree Celsius for the first time ever in July 2022. A small town in China's northwest recorded 52 degree Celsius last year, the highest ever for that country. In 2021, Sicily in Italy recorded 48.8 degree Celsius, the highest for Europe ever. These are just a few examples.

An analysis by *Carbon Brief*, a UK-based publication focused on climate change, last year showed that nearly 40% of the Earth had recorded its highest-ever daily temperature between 2013 to 2023. This includes places in Antarctica as well. The highest temperature in India, in Rajasthan's Phalodi, was also recorded during this period.

However, the highest ever temperature recorded anywhere on Earth, 56.7 degree

Celsius in a place called Death Valley in the desert of California, United States, was recorded more than 100 years ago, in 1913.

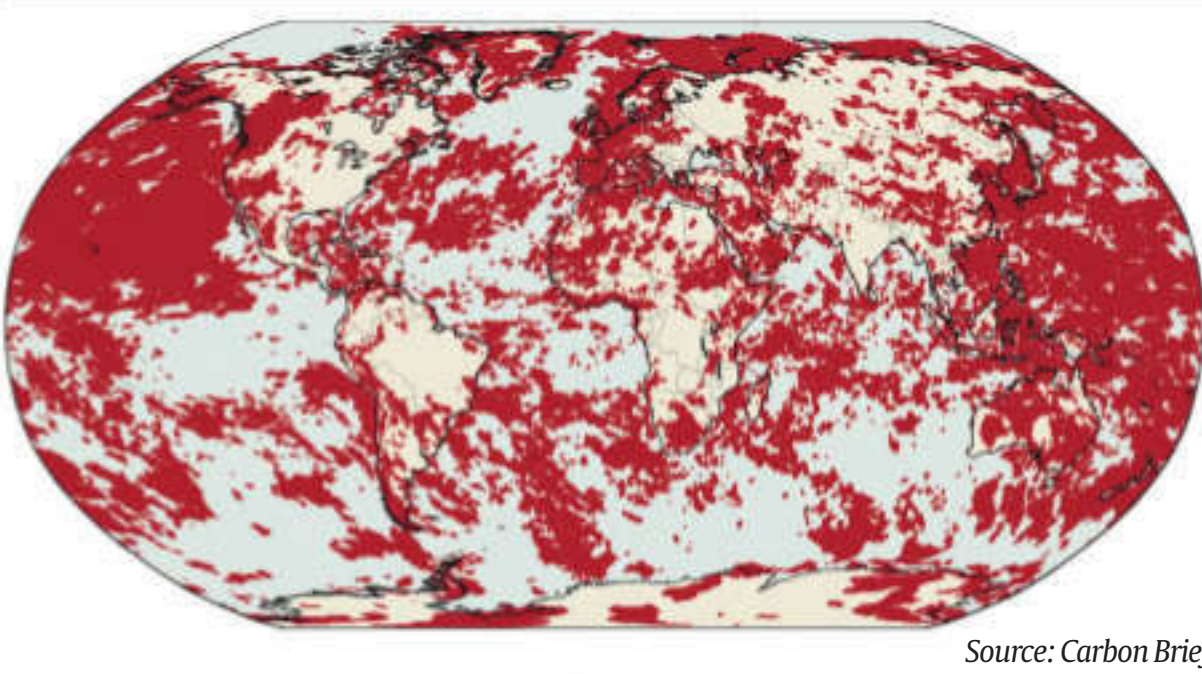
Delhi Anomaly

If the 52.9 degree Celsius recorded at one of the stations in Delhi on Wednesday is verified, it would be an all time high for India. But as of now it is suspect. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said it was checking the authenticity of the reading by an automatic weather station in Mungeshpur, located on the northern outskirts of Delhi, bordering Haryana.

The doubts over the Mungeshpur reading stems mainly from the fact that none of the other stations in Delhi — there are 20 of them — recorded a temperature that was close to 52.9 degree Celsius. The maximum temperature in other stations of Delhi on Wednesday was recorded by the Najafgarh station, which gave a reading of 49.1 degree Celsius. The station that is taken to be representative of Delhi — Safdarjung — showed a maximum temperature of 46.8 degree Celsius. This itself was an 80-year record, the highest since 1944.

Even if the Mungeshpur data was not so

RED EVERYWHERE: 40% OF THE WORLD SAW THEIR HIGHEST TEMPERATURE ON RECORD IN THE 10 YEARS FROM 2013-2023



Source: Carbon Brief

overtly suspicious — and IMD officials admit it is — a record-breaking temperature like this would have needed a verification. Met offices across the world do a double-check on any such extreme weather event. It took a few days for the UK record to be officially confirmed by the UK Met office. The Sicily

temperature record for Europe became official only in January this year, almost three years after it was recorded.

But record-breaking or not, there is no doubt about the fact that Delhi, and indeed most of northern India, is going through one of the worst heatwaves. In most places, maxi-

mum temperatures are 5 to 10 degree Celsius above normal. Wednesday was the fourth consecutive day when the Safdarjung station recorded a temperature well above 45 degree Celsius. The fact that temperatures have not been record-breaking is no consolation for populations reeling under increasingly prolonged and severe heatwave conditions.

"It is very concerning that annual trends in heatwaves now show temperature departures of 5-9 degree Celsius from the normal summer weather... Heatwaves are clearly the single largest threat to India's well-being today," said Aarti Khosla, director of Climate Trends, a climate organisation.

"Temperatures in Delhi and neighbouring NCR states in the last two days are proof that the issue is now about survivability," she said.

Global Warming

The year 2024 was predicted to be extremely warm. Last year had emerged as the warmest year on record, globally, and the effect was expected to continue this year as well. And so far, it has.

April 2024 was the 11th consecutive month when the global average monthly temperature for that month touched a new record, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service, an agency of the European

Commission. The one year period between May 2023 to April 2024 was warmer than any previous 12-month period, about 1.61 degree Celsius higher than the pre-industrial (1850-1900) average.

The warming over India is not as pronounced as the world taken as a whole. Annual mean temperatures over India have risen by about 0.7 degree Celsius compared to 1900 levels. This is significantly lower than the 1.59 degree Celsius rise for average land temperatures across the world. If oceans too are included, global temperatures right now are at least 1.1 degree Celsius higher than pre-industrial averages.

However, heatwaves over India are noticeably more severe. In 2023, heatwave conditions prevailed even in February, technically a winter month for which heatwave thresholds are not even defined because they are not expected.

The current spell of high temperatures in Delhi, and most of north India, looks anomalous mainly because it is being compared to normal temperatures that are based on averages of 1981-2010 period. Going forward, 45 degree Celsius plus temperatures are likely to very quickly become the new normal, and a 50 degree Celsius reading will no longer look suspicious.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

ANCIENT EGYPTIANS MIGHT HAVE TRIED TO TREAT BRAIN CANCER: STUDY

ARJUN SENGUPTA
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

ANALYSIS OF a 4,600-year-old Egyptian skull has revealed signs of brain cancer and its treatment, according to a study published in the journal *Frontiers in Medicine* on Wednesday.

Using a microscope, scientists Edgard Camarós, Tatiana Tondini, and Albert Isidro found cut marks around the skull's edges surrounding dozens of lesions that earlier researchers had linked to metastasized brain cancer.

The discovery provides further insight into Ancient Egyptian medicine, and possibly pushes back the timeline of humanity's documented attempts to treat cancer by up to a thousand years.

"There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, because we knew what we had just discovered," Camarós, a palaeopathologist at the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, told *The New York Times*.

Medicine in Ancient Egypt

It has long been known that ancient Egyptians had fairly detailed knowledge of the human body and its afflictions. For instance, "it is clear according to preserved papyri and hieroglyphs that ancient Egyptian medicine was advanced enough to describe, classify and successfully treat specific diseases and traumatic injuries, including bone trauma," the study said.

According to Dr Khaled Elsayad, "Specialised physicians would take a medical history, perform a manual examination, and assess clinical/vital findings to diagnose a disease. The range of conditions treated and the various conservative and surgical treatments used are astounding" ("What Ancient Egyptian Medicine Can Teach Us", published in *JCO Global Oncology*, 2023).

He further wrote: "Ancient Egyptians

understood the importance of maintaining good hygiene and eating habits for good health. The emphasis on healthy food, sport, personal hygiene, daily body cleansing, and mouthwash is still relevant today."

Despite ancient Egypt cultivating one of the most advanced medical knowledge bases known in Antiquity, cancer represented a "clear medical frontier" concerning diagnosis and treatment. The *Edwin Smith Papyrus*, considered to be the oldest medical surgical treatise in the world dated to around 3,600 years ago, refers to what many researchers believe to be a cancer case. The text describes it as "a grave disease" for which there "was no treatment."

Attempts to treat cancer

Yet, the latest discovery suggests that ancient Egyptians might have tried to treat the disease, even if unsuccessfully.

"Reliable perimortem [at or near death] cut marks on the bone surface have been identified in clear association with the metastatic lesions [cancer] on the posterior cranial region. The position of the marks, running through two of the lesions with a clear associated start and end at both sides of the lesions, suggest some kind of perimortem anthropic [human] intervention... which might indicate medical surgical exploration or an attempt of care or treatment," the study said.

However, the authors caution that they cannot, with certainty, tell the exact timing of the cutting. It is possible, the cut marks which were made using metal tools, indicate postmortem exploration of the cancerous tumour and its pathology.

"We have two possibilities: in a way that they tried to treat it, or in a way that they tried to medically understand it, in terms of probably treating it in the future," Camarós said. "I think that's a milestone in the history of medicine."

WITH INPUTS FROM
THE NEW YORK TIMES

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, MAY 29

IN THE quarters leading up to the elections scheduled for 2004, India's economy was growing at around 8%, its forex reserves were healthy, Atal Bihari Vajpayee's popularity was soaring, and the opposition was in disarray. But warning signals too, were flashing: there was resentment among several sections of the people, and rising tension between the BJP and its ideological fount, the RSS.

The Prime Minister's advisers persuaded him that India was "shining", and he called elections six months early in 2004. The so-called "feelgood factor" failed to deliver, and the BJP lost. India got a new Prime Minister for the next 10 years — Dr Manmohan Singh.

The election of 2004

This election saw two historic reforms. Electronic voting machines (EVMs) replaced paper ballots at all seats across the country, and the Supreme Court made it compulsory for candidates to declare their full assets and liabilities, and details of criminal cases against them, in their nomination papers.

A four-phase election was held between April 20 and May 10, 2004, in which 58.07% of the country's 67.14 crore electors turned out. The BJP could win only 138 seats, and the NDA 181.

The Congress won 145 seats, CPI(M) 43, Samajwadi Party 35, and BSP 19. Rahul Gandhi entered Lok Sabha for the first time, winning in Amethi. Sonia Gandhi won in Rae Bareilly.

Sonia's Congress worked hard to cobble together a coalition that could form the government. The Left played a key role in the creation of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), comprising more than a dozen parties. Sonia put her ambitions aside to hand the reins of the government to Manmohan Singh, and herself became chairperson of the UPA.

Singh took oath on May 22, 2004. CPI(M) veteran Somnath Chatterjee was elected Speaker, even though his party was not part of the government. To give Sonia a rank equal to that of a Cabinet minister, Singh appointed her chairperson of the government's National Advisory Council (NAC).

Reforms and nuclear deal

The UPA government carried out landmark reforms, including passing the Right To Information Act in 2005, and the



Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, Sonia Gandhi, and other leaders after being sworn in on May 22, 2004. *PIB*

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Right to Education Act in 2009. Also in 2009, the government implemented, under great pressure from the Minister for Human Resource Development Arjun Singh, 27% reservation for OBCs in admission to higher education institutions.

The signing of the civilian nuclear deal with the United States in July 2008 led to the CPI(M) pulling support to the government. The government called a special session of Parliament on July 21-22, and the CPI(M) asked Speaker Chatterjee to resign. He refused, and the CPI(M) expelled its 10-term MP. The government won the confidence vote 275-256.

Churn in the BJP

The shock defeat of 2004 was followed by a series of setbacks for the BJP. M Venkaiah Naidu had to resign as party president, and Advani took charge again. In April 2005, RSS chief K S Sudarshan, who had, without taking any names, earlier described Vajpayee's close confidant Brajesh Mishra as "incompetent", asked both Advani and Vajpayee to step

aside for a younger leadership to emerge.

In June 2005, on a visit to Pakistan, Advani praised Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah, calling him a "secular" person and visiting his *mazaar*. He resigned as party chief that December, and was replaced by Rajnath Singh. In May 2006, Pramod Mahajan, the BJP's rising star, was shot dead by his own brother.

Vajpayee, 85 years old and ailing, decided not to fight the 2009 election. Advani, 81, became the BJP's prime ministerial candidate.

The election of 2009

In Assembly elections held in 2008, the Congress retained power in Delhi and Rajasthan, but the BJP returned in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and also won in Karnataka. In November, Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists attacked Mumbai. The Lok Sabha election of 2009 was held in five phases between April 16 and May 13.

The elections were held on newly delimited constituencies and their boundaries, which resulted in the composition of voters changing in almost 500 constituencies. Of the 71.69 crore electors, 41.71 crore (58.21%) voted at 8.30 lakh polling stations



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June 1: Vote in Punjab, anniversary of 2 events that changed state's politics

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, MAY 29

JUNE 1, THE day Punjab votes in the last phase of the Lok Sabha election, happens to be the anniversary of two pivotal events that have influenced the recent history and politics of the state. Both events have featured in the campaign — either as part of direct reminders to electors, or as echoes or references in speeches delivered by certain candidates.

June 1 will be the 40th anniversary of the beginning of Operation Blue Star, the Indian Army operation to flush out Khalistani militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The assault on the holiest shrine of the Sikhs triggered a chain of bloody events including the assassination of India's Prime Minister, and unprecedented organised violence

against members of the community in Delhi and other places.

Years later, on another June 1, a copy of the Guru Granth Sahib (*saroop*), considered the living Guru of the Sikhs, was stolen from a gurdwara in Faridkot, leading to a series of sacrilegious incidents that have had a profound impact on Punjab politics.

June 1, 1984: Op Blue Star

Despite objections from various quarters including Cabinet Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Indira Gandhi authorised the military action at the Golden Temple in mid-May, 1984. By May 29, troops from the 9th Infantry Division in Meerut had arrived in Amritsar, supported by Para commandos. Their mission was to flush out militant ideologue Jamail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers who had set up base in the temple.

On June 1, an exchange of fire between

militants and CRPF personnel who had taken up positions atop private buildings near the temple resulted in the deaths of 11 civilians. Operation Blue Star lasted until June 10, and took a heavy toll on life, property, and emotions. The Akal Takht, the temporal seat of the Sikhs, was destroyed in the operation.

Army reports listed 554 deaths, including those of four officers and 79 soldiers, but actual casualties were likely much higher, with many pilgrims among the victims. Bhindranwale was killed in the operation.

FALLOUT: Operation Blue Star cast a long shadow on the politics of Punjab and India. On October 31, 1984, Indira was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards, which led to mobs going on the rampage, killing 2,146 people in Delhi alone.

In 1985, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal,

a leader of the Akali Dal, the country's oldest regional party, was assassinated within a month of his signing a peace accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. The "dark decade" of violence and instability in Punjab followed.

Operation Blue Star remains a potent factor in Punjab's politics even today. Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal has been showing a picture of the damaged Akal Takht at every election rally in an attempt to whip up anger against the Congress. The AAP and BJP have been reminding voters of the violence unleashed on Sikhs in the aftermath of Indira's assassination.

Many Sikh voters, however, do not hold the current leadership of the Congress responsible. Rahul Gandhi has performed *sewa* at the Golden Temple on several occasions, and the Congress hopes for a good

showing in the election.

June 1, 2015: Holy Book stolen

After a *saroop* of the Guru Granth Sahib disappeared from a gurdwara in Burj Jawahar Singh Wala, Faridkot, widespread protests broke out across Punjab. Extensive searches were carried out, including draining a large water body behind the gurdwara, but the *saroop* was not found.

In October 2015, torn pages from what was believed to be the stolen *saroop* were discovered outside the Bargari gurdwara across the road. This led to a sharp escalation of unrest, and two protesters were killed in police firing at Behbal Kalan. More than 100 incidents of sacrilege have been reported over the last few years, some of which have led to deadly lynchings of the alleged accused.

FALLOUT: The issue of sacrilege has

been extremely sensitive, and has left a significant mark on the politics of the state since 2015. After two successive terms in power, the Akali Dal, which was seen as being lenient towards those responsible for the incidents, suffered a major defeat in the 2017 elections, when it could win only 15 of the 117 seats in the Assembly.

Congress Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh faced dissent and was replaced in 2021 after his party colleague Navjot Singh Sidhu accused him of not doing enough to bring the accused in the 2015 case to justice. Last December, Sukhbir Singh Badal apologised for the incidents of sacrilege during his tenure.

The issue remains sensitive, with ongoing political repercussions. In 2022, the Punjab Assembly passed a Bill that provides for life imprisonment for sacrilege of the Guru Granth Sahib and other religious texts.



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

PROACTIVE STEPS NEEDED TO GET MORE WOMEN INTO SALARIED JOBS

A crucial way of breaking free from patriarchal chains and boosting growth across the economy—more women with independent, regular sources of income—often goes under-served. In this context, recent data from the government’s Periodic Labour Force Survey should set off alarm bells. During January-March 2024, the share of urban women in regular salaried jobs hit a fresh low at 52.3 percent, down from 53 percent in the October-December 2023 quarter. This is the lowest share of women in wage employment in any quarter of the past six years. When compared to the peak of women’s regular wage employment, at 61.2 percent in the first quarter of 2020-21, this is a major regression.

In the same January-March quarter this year, the share of women engaged in self-employment went up to 41.3 percent from 40.3 percent in the previous quarter. Self-employment, especially for rural women, is a euphemism for unpaid household work or in small family businesses. It is seen as inferior employment to salaried work that assures regular incomes—a stepping stone to an independent life. The National Statistical Office’s data also shows that, while the labour force participation rate among urban women had gone up to a new high of 25.6 percent in the first quarter of the calendar year, it is still quite low in absolute terms and lower than the rural number.

Lest we think gender disparity in employment is a problem at the bottom of the pyramid, it must be pointed out that women in the upper echelons too do not fare better. After the amendment to the Companies Act in 2013, it has been mandatory to appoint at least one woman director on the boards of companies with an annual turnover of ₹100 crore or more. Though the legal nudge has increased women’s representation, by 2022 only 18 percent of the Nifty500 companies’ board members were women. To speed up women’s employment, proactive administrative steps are needed. The impact, for example, of the recruitment of a larger number of women by state governments in their police forces has been positive. In the long term, it is a fight to change patriarchal attitudes; but in the short term, data shows the change is too slow for comfort.

GIVE WOMEN DUE SPACE IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

THE Malayalam film industry is having a dream run these days—both critically and commercially. They are topping the charts in cinemas and on OTT platforms despite being the smallest player in the South Indian film industry. But if somebody watching the recent Malayalam hits thinks that Malayali women are almost non-existent in Kerala society, then s/he cannot be blamed. For, women have become invisible in Malayalam cinema. On the list of recent releases, most films have no major women characters in them, let alone in lead roles. Whether it was *Aave-sham*, *Manjummel Boys* or *Bramayugam*—the three top grossers of the year—none has a women character with screen-time stretching beyond a few minutes.

This absence of female actors was flagged by director Anjali Menon when she asked, “Where are the women in Malayalam cinema?” While her question was heavily trooled by portraying women in the film industry as crybabies, it provoked some serious discussion too. Ironically, around the same time, two women actors from Kerala were hogging the limelight at the Cannes Film Festival. Kani Kusruti and Divya Prabha, who played the lead roles in Payal Kapadia’s *All We Imagine As Light*, were the cynosure of all eyes along with Kapadia. It was as if the duo was answering the question posed by Anjali Menon. Their much-talked-about presence at Cannes only reinforced the fact that there is no dearth of talent among female actors—but only that script writers and directors should have an inclination to give them due space.

The absence of women in Malayalam cinema does not mean there is a deliberate attempt to make women disappear from the screens. But with many films without women becoming huge hits, it is seen as natural that filmmakers would start thinking female actors were dispensable. And that is a worrying trend. While it is not creatively prudent to reserve roles for women in every film being made, it is also not a good sign that more and more films are becoming hits with no women in them. It is appreciable that people are noticing the ‘invisibilisation’ of women, as such discussions are crucial in addressing gender disparity. Cinema should never be a ‘boys’ club’ and it is the responsibility of everyone who loves cinema—from the writer to the viewer—to ensure that.

QUICK TAKE

NO SMALL POTATO

THE UN observes May 30 as the international day of potato. It’s as good a time as any to look at the humble spud’s demand-supply imbalance that is affecting household food budgets across India this year. Potatoes usually hit the market in July-August, but demand for the root vegetable has peaked earlier this summer. As a result, wholesale prices have surged by a quarter between April 1 and May 23. Traders have cautioned that crop failures in some parts mean that the supply is unlikely to ease before Diwali. Building more extensive cold storage chains can cushion households from future price shocks—in potatoes as well as other vegetables.

A constitutional court attains significance on account of its counter-majoritarian role in a democracy. Judicial review is a process against legislative mischiefs and executive onslaught. When personal liberty is in peril, the trial court also exercises a constitutional function. Article 21 of the Constitution protects liberty of every person, which should not be deprived of “except according to procedure established by law”. Article 22 grants “protection against arrest and detention in certain cases”. The constitutional text, which on the face of it is impressive, requires a conscious effort from the judiciary to materialise. Unfortunately, this is an area where Indian courts have often failed. During the last decade, the country had to pay a heavy cost for this failure, in terms of democracy and freedom.

Yet, a series of consolatory orders issued recently by the Supreme Court are significant. By way of an extraordinary order, the court granted interim bail to the Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. In another case, it invalidated the arrest of journalist Prabir Purkayastha and directed his release. In yet another development, the court ordered the release of Gautam Navlakha, a great intellectual of our times, an accused in the Bhima Koregaon case. Again, a bench headed by Justice Abhay Oka made an important declaration that the Enforcement Directorate cannot arrest an accused once the special court has taken cognisance of the complaint of money laundering.

In some of these cases, the court was correcting lower courts while in others, it was correcting itself. The interim bail in Kejriwal’s case raises many questions on its reasoning, precedential validity, and impact on the cases of Manish Sisodia, Hemant Soren, etc., who faced a similar predicament. The Criminal Procedure Code does not contemplate the idea of interim bail. But the power of the Supreme Court to grant an interim bail could be justified by Article 142 of the Constitution, according to which the court can, in the facts and circumstances of a given case, pass any order to provide “complete justice”. Yet, in Kejriwal’s case, with a direction to get back to the prison in a foisted case, justice rendered was clearly incomplete.

Kejriwal’s plea was not for interim bail or even regular bail. He complained that the very arrest was illegal. The basic contention was the arrest was in breach

Three-fourths of India’s prisoners are undertrials, many charged under draconian laws. A truth commission is needed to probe why and compensate those languishing

WHY INDIA NEEDS A TRUTH COMMISSION

KALEESWARAM RAJ

Lawyer, Supreme Court of India



MANDAR PARDIKAR

of Section 19 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The arrest based on a statement was made under dubious circumstances and therefore was invalid, he contended. Even the singular statement where Kejriwal was named was not corroborated. The long delay between the incriminating statement and the arrest was also highlighted by Kejriwal’s counsel. The approver’s statement should not be the basis for arrest, it was argued. With such a strong case against the arrest, it would have been more plausible for the court to stay the order of arrest and remand of the chief minister or invalidate such acts, which would have freed him without a deadline, as now happened. However, even the present or-

der may provide him some respite.

In Gautam Navlakha’s case, however, the court was correcting itself by vacating the stay on the bail that the Bombay High Court granted. The court noted that the trial might take several years to conclude and detaining him till then would be unfair. Let it not be forgotten that there are reports that try to establish that the significant part of the “evidence” in the Bhima Koregaon case was implanted into the computer devices to book the accused.

Now that Navlakha has come out of prison, his notes reflect the realities, attitudes and apathies of the regime. His release is a solace for himself and those who believe in the universality of human rights and the intrinsic value of

THE CURIOUS CASE OF FEWER VOTERS IN A QUARTER OF SEATS

PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY

Chairman, All India Professionals’ Congress and Data Analytics team of the Congress

Phases 4 and 5 experienced this trend. In Phase 6, 29 percent of seats saw a decline. So there is no consistent pattern across phases and it is more a reflection of the states and seats that went to polls. Voter apathy is not an adequate explanation.

Covid deaths cannot be an explanation, too, because this pattern is not observed uniformly across states. Karnataka,

turnout in 2024 is 66 percent after six phases—the same as in 2014 and slightly lower than 2019’s 68 percent. But in the 124 seats where voter numbers fell this time, the turnout was 62 percent in 2024, against 66 percent in 2014 and 68 percent in 2019. So there was significant difference in turnout percentages in these seats compared to previous elections.

In the remaining 361 constituencies where there was no voter decline, the turnout in 2024 was 67 percent in 2024 vs 68 percent in 2019 and 66 percent in 2014. So it is not even the case that the turnout was much higher in the other three-fourths of constituencies to make up for the big fall in the quarter.

It is evident that there is something intriguing and surprising in voter turnout. What adds to the intrigue are ground reports showing videos of deliberate voter suppression in parts of UP.

Further, in Tamil Nadu, it is generally observed that the BJP or its ally is in a close contest in two out of the 39 constituencies—Coimbatore and Vellore. Intriguingly, it is exactly these two seats that saw the highest increase of 9 percent in total voters, when in most of the other 37 constituencies there was a decline. Similarly in Thrissur, which is perhaps the only constituency in Kerala where the BJP is expected to be in contest, there was a 4 percent increase in voters, while in most other constituencies there was a reduction. How is it that a few constituencies saw a big increase in voters when a majority of the others in the state saw a decline?

To be clear, this is not an insinuation or an allegation. But it is amply evident from the Election Commission’s own data that this requires further investigation and explanation. Ideally, the EC should investigate if there were any suspicious voter rolls or booth management activities that may have led to either voter suppression or bogus addition. This is of paramount importance to retain and regain fast-eroding trust in the integrity of India’s democratic process.

(Views are personal) (pchucky@gmail.com)

IN just over a quarter of all the constituencies covered till Phase 6 of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, fewer people came out to vote compared to the 2019 election. This has never happened before in India’s electoral history, since in a young and growing country the total population and the number of 18-year-olds who are eligible to vote only increase every year. So it is very rare to find a decline in the absolute number of voters between two five-year election cycles.

In Phase 6, where 58 constituencies finished polling, 17 of them, or 29 percent, saw a decline in voters vis-a-vis 2019, further confirming a trend spotted earlier.

Polling has now been completed in 485 constituencies across six phases. Some 575 million Indians have cast their votes in these constituencies, compared to 551 million in 2019, 495 million in 2014 and 371 million in 2009. Clearly, there has been an increase in the total number of people who came out to vote in these constituencies. This is what is expected in a growing country like India.

But these aggregates hide a surprising trend in 2024—124 of these 485 constituencies experienced a decline in the total number of voters from 2019. To put this in context, none of these constituencies saw a decline in voters in 2014 from 2009, and only 24 did in 2019 from 2014.

Most of these 124 constituencies that saw a decline are in eight states—Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Kerala, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Haryana.

As a share of the total seats in a state, 80 percent of the constituencies in Haryana, 70 percent in Kerala, nearly 60 percent in Rajasthan, and 50 percent in Tamil Nadu saw a decline in voters in 2024. There wasn’t a single constituency in these states that experienced a similar decline in either 2019 or 2014.

There is no discernible political pattern in these 124 constituencies, at least ostensibly. Fifty of them were won by non-NDA parties in 2019; 26 are reserved for SC/ST.

What explains the trend?

Half the seats in Phase 1 and 42 percent in Phase 2 witnessed a reduction. So it is more a reflection of the states that mostly polled in these phases—Tamil Nadu and Kerala. In Phase 3, 16 percent of seats saw a decline, but just 3 percent in

DECLINE IN VOTERS IN 2024 vs 2019		
PHASE	SEATS	SHARE OF PHASE SEATS
1	50	50%
2	37	42%
3	15	16%
4	1	1%
5	4	8%
6	17	29%

In a first, the total number of voters has fallen in 124 of the 485 constituencies that have voted in the first six phases of the Lok Sabha elections. It’s difficult to explain this with the heatwave or Covid deaths. So what is the reason behind the intriguing oddity?

Chattisgarh, Telangana, Assam and Jharkhand do not have any constituencies where the total number of voters has fallen. While the more developed states that would have presumably experienced lower Covid deaths, such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have seen more than half their constituencies with fewer voters.

The heat wave cannot be an explanation either, since there is no consistent correlation between higher temperatures and these 124 constituencies.

How is it, then, that a quarter of seats saw fewer voters, but the overall turnout percentage in 2024 is the same as in 2014 and only slightly lower than 2019? The



A thought for today
*Thousands have lived without love,
not one without water*
WH AUDEN

Not A Drop To Waste

Water woes are a recurring Indian urban phenomenon. Reusing treated water is the solution

Delhi residents are experiencing a double whammy of intense heat and water scarcity. Parts of the capital yesterday recorded a maximum temperature of 52.3°C. Along with it came announcements this week of water rationing. It's the second major city, after Bengaluru, to simultaneously experience a heatwave and acute water shortage this summer.

The scariest moment in urban India was Chennai's "Day Zero" in June 2019, when the city's four major water reservoirs dried up. We are very vulnerable to water crises.

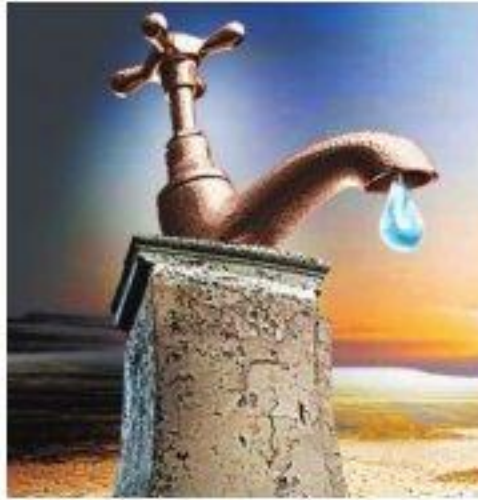
Urban mess | Common to all urban water nightmares is that economic growth and consequent building expansion have outpaced the capacity of civic authorities. Private firms have stepped into the breach to support this growth. But the downside is that they lack scale to solve critical problems.

Reality check | India cannot escape the impact of climate change. Extended heatwaves are here to stay and water demand in urban areas will not reduce. Neither can some consequences of haphazard urban expansion, such as building over natural landscapes, be undone. To illustrate, in 2022, the Karnataka govt told the state assembly that 40 lakes in Bengaluru had "disappeared".

Recycle, the best option | On the heels of its "Day Zero", Chennai became the first Indian city to recycle wastewater at scale. Tertiary treatment reverse osmosis plants are used to recycle water for industrial use. Recycling lifts the pressure on freshwater resources and allows urban areas to cushion the impact of poor monsoons. Some states have now mandated industrial zones to use treated water. It's a sensible policy as India's ranked the 13th most water-stressed in the world.

Potential's huge | In 2016, IISc carried out a study of the potential addition to Bengaluru's water supply through treating sewage water. It estimated that of the annual domestic demand of about 20 TMC, treated sewage could provide up to 80% of the requirement. It's consistent with UN's findings that on average, high-income countries treat about 70% of the industrial and municipal wastewater they generate, while the ratio falls to about 28% in lower middle-income countries.

Pushing ahead with recycling doesn't need huge govt projects. Tight implementation of a policy to get both residential and commercial projects to use recycled water will have a significant impact. Who knows, not long after, India may go the Singapore way to use treated water in craft beer.



Choppy Skies

'Clear air turbulence' is the new scare story of flying. And more may be in store

Air travel was never a simple affair for many people. But recent incidents of air turbulence, with stories of passengers being tossed around and literally 'hitting the roof' take it to another level. The most disturbing incident involved a Singapore Airlines flight from London to Singapore, which faced rapid altitude loss, and led to a fatality, besides injuries to dozens of people. Close on its heels came reports of 12 passengers suffering injuries on a Qatar Airways flight from Doha to Dublin.

Underbelly of travel | It doesn't help that this is not your usual problem for which blame can be assigned and the culprit put in the dock. Facing air turbulence is like dealing with a choppy sea, inevitable. While technology has made it possible to foresee pockets of turbulence and for pilots to issue a cabin warning or avoid them, there is still the 'clear air turbulence (CAT)' that can appear, literally, out of nowhere, sometimes causing mayhem in the aircraft.

Climate change | The problem can get worse. Researchers at University of Reading found a 55% increase in severe air turbulence due to CAT in the North Atlantic between 1979 and 2020, attributing it to climate change. University of Chicago researchers have claimed that wind speeds, which are behind CAT, will rise by 2% for every degree Celsius of global warming.

What's the fix? | While avoiding turbulence may not be possible, preventing injuries is. Keeping seat belts fastened, even at cruise altitude, is the best safeguard against the vagaries of weather, at least till technology breaks new ground. As for the anxiety and panic experienced during rapid altitude loss or violent buffeting of the aircraft, passengers can take heart from aircraft being designed to endure significantly higher stress levels. Chances of a commercial plane going down due to turbulence is almost nil.



'And how many deaths

...will it take 'til we know that too many people have died?'

Bachi Karkaria
The answer (can't keep) 'blowin' in the wind'. Four times in under a fortnight we've been shaken by catastrophic - and totally avoidable - tragedies. 68 lives snuffed out. Parents, siblings, breadwinners, children, even those who'd barely taken a day's breath - all grabbed with death's non-negotiable finality. All leaving an unbridgeable chasm of loss.

Simply because someone was too greedy to follow the rules, or enforce them. That's the bigger tragedy. And after the finger-pointing, blame-shunting, politicising, righteous editorialising, it will happen again - and yet again. That's the biggest tragedy of all.

None of these victims was living recklessly. What's more routine than filling up at a petrol station? As those 17 delivery boys, autorickshawallas, office-goers and visiting couple were doing in Mumbai's Ghatkopar on May 13. Can you imagine their horror when a 120x120 ft gasping came crashing down on them? Did they even have time to hoard in disbelief?

What's more routine than going to work? Even if it's the choice-less choice of a hazardous industry - or living in its vicinity. As those 11 dead and 70 grievously injured in Mumbai's Dombivli had done last Thursday when the Amudam chemical plant boiler blasted apart, and flames roared through this MIDC hub with the speed and fury of a forest fire.

What's more routine than families flocking to amusement parks during summer holidays? As those 33 people, including several children - plus countless traumatised - had done at Rajkot's sprawling recreational centre last Saturday. Excited shouts turned to ghoulish screams, as they were trapped in an inferno deadlier than the heatwave they'd gone there to escape.

What's more routine than parental joy on first seeing the fruition of a nine-month wait and longer dreams? If heartbreak can have an ascending scale, then surely up there would be the seven tiny lives now charred to lumps of black in the Delhi nursing home last Sunday.

Okay, all the owners have been arrested. But if the buck stops smugly there, the tragedies won't.

Alec Smart said: "In the Pune killer crash, the initial 'justice' was more juvenile."

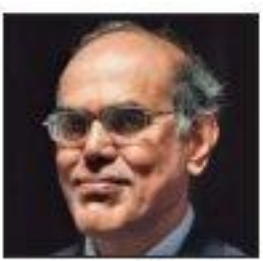


erratica

Dear New Govt, Do Get Real

Message to incoming GOI: in the fastest growing large economy, over 80% of those out-of-work are young. And remember, the largest number of poor in the world live in India

Duvvuri Subbarao



The election campaign is behind us. Ironically, in a country where millions struggle for a daily living, it was dominated by Hindu-Muslim divide and bulldozer politics rather than bread-and-butter issues of jobs and prices. It's imperative, therefore, for the incoming govt to leave campaign rhetoric behind and apply itself to the task of accelerating growth, for all. Here's a summary of the good, the bad and the ugly of the India growth story that should inform the way forward for the new govt.

Bright spot | The highlight of the 'good' part of the story is that with growth averaging 7%, we are the fastest growing large economy in the world today. This is a significant turnaround from 10 years ago when growth was slowing, inflation was high, rupee was volatile and govt's fiscal position was worrying. A bad loan problem had sapped investor confidence and crippled bank balance sheets. The much-dreaded stagnation seemed a distinct possibility.

Ten years on, India's growth story is compelling. It has moved up from being the world's 11th largest to 5th largest economy. By way of GDP, we overtook UK last year and is on course to surpass Japan in 2026 and Germany in 2027. Growth is strong, inflation is approaching target, albeit unevenly, rupee is stable and service exports of nearly 10% of GDP are giving unexpected resilience to the external sector.

The bad loan problem is resolved with bank and corporate balance sheets in robust health.

Economy flexing | Public infra is being built at a frenetic pace. Digital revolution is enhancing productivity, creating jobs and adding to govt revenues. We've birthed many unicorns. Recent estimates suggest extreme poverty is all but eliminated. Amid the pessimism about global growth because of slowing trade, persistent inflation, rising public debt and deteriorating geopolitical tensions, India is gaining global heft as an emerging economic superpower.

Not so rosy | But here's where the 'bad' part of the story chimes in, raising two questions in particular: How

robust is our growth, and can we maintain this momentum? Both defy clearly affirmative answers.

Economists who've dirtied their hands with numbers have questioned India's methodology of growth estimation, which glosses over outsized discrepancies to generate a flattering headline number. If you net out the discrepancies, they argue, the underlying growth

extended period - here our record has been unimpressive. Per IMF data, economy has clocked growth of over 7.6% just seven times since the 1991 reforms. But we could never sustain that pace for more than two consecutive years.

Poor country | Could this time be different? That our current growth is driven just by public investment does not inspire confidence. We need to be firing on all cylinders to have a fighting chance of winning the race.

Further, that we're moving up the global league by way of output may be cause for cheer, but certainly not for celebration. We might be a large economy, mostly by virtue of our large population, but we're still a poor country. With per capita income of \$2,730 in current dollars, we rank 136th in the league of nations. We're the poorest country among Brics, we're the poorest in G20, and we have more poor people than any other country.

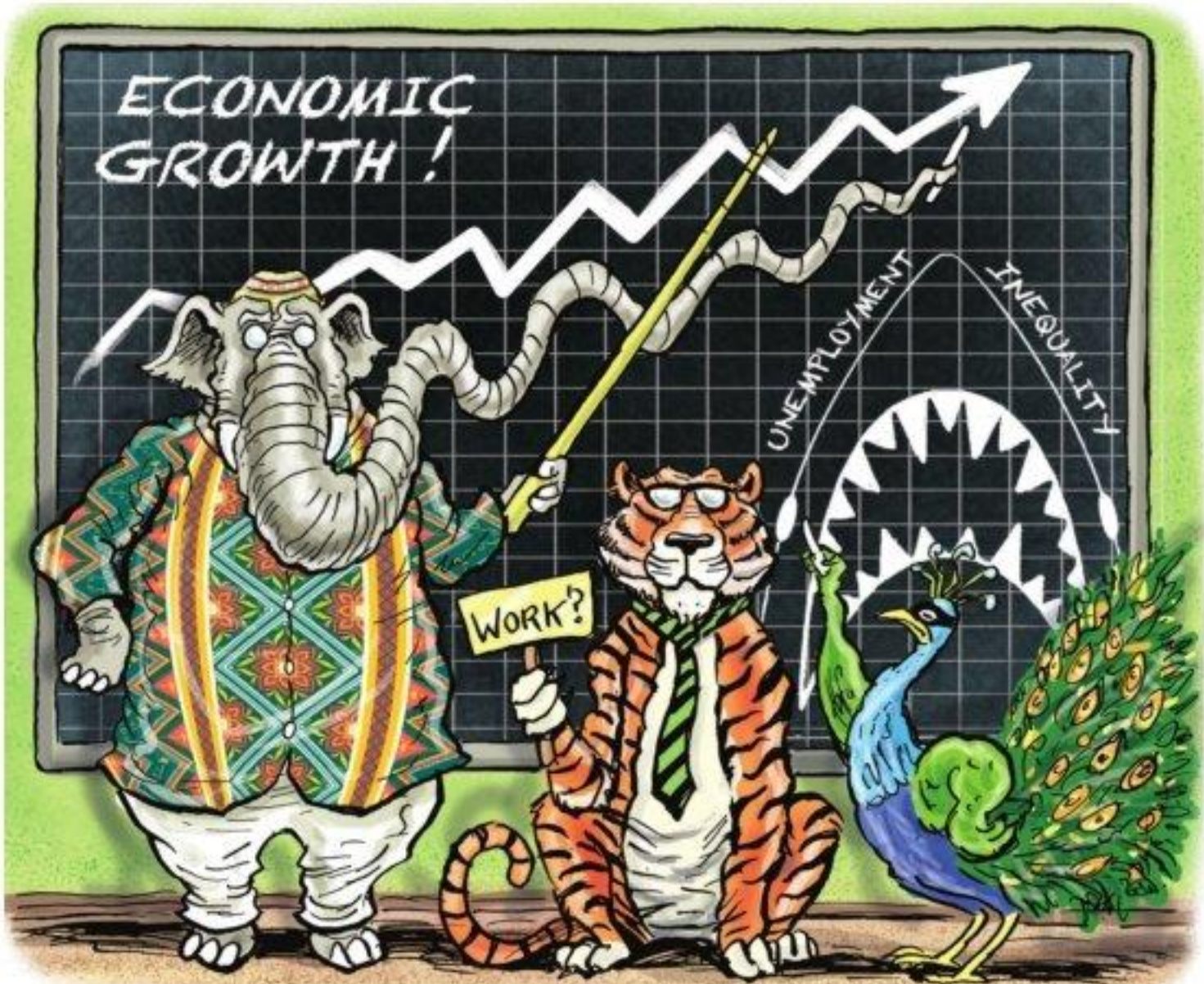
The real downer | The 'ugly' part of the story is defined by two interrelated maladies - jobs and inequality. Contrary to Modi's promise in 2014 that jobs will be his top priority, unemployment rate has barely budged in the last 10 years.

Two things make the unemployment problem particularly distressing. First is the size of youth unemployment; ILO's India Employment Report says more than 80% of India's unemployed are its youth. The second distressing feature is the low female labour force participation rate, which is lower than that of countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. There's much hype over how we're poised for a huge demographic dividend, but we should also know no jobs means no dividend.

Inequality worry | Deepening inequality is in part a corollary to rising unemployment. A recent report by World Inequality Lab, co-authored by Thomas Piketty, says income inequality in India is currently at its highest level since 1922. We know from development experience that reducing inequalities is not just a moral imperative, but a necessary condition for sustained growth.

'It's the economy, stupid' has become a cliché, but it's the message the new govt must take to heart as it gets down to business.

The writer is a former RBI governor



Chad Crowe

Unbridled jubilation on growth sprint is misplaced because much of it is 'catch up' growth...challenge lies in sustaining that pace over an extended period

momentum is much less impressive.

There's also an argument that even as our current growth sprint is grabbing headlines, unbridled jubilation is misplaced because much of it is 'catch up' growth. Poor countries grow faster just as a child grows faster than an adult.

The challenge lies in sustaining that pace over an

Punjab's Power Ride On A Rocky Road

SAD-BJP split, as well as some anti-incumbency against AAP, has Congress eyeing anti-BJP, anti-AAP votes. AAP's still banking on its free power scheme. Support for radicals shows turmoil in Panthic politics

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An outlier among north Indian states to BJP's sweeping victories of 2014 and 2019, Punjab presents ironies this time as well. Two years after a handsome mandate to AAP in assembly polls (92 of 117 seats, 42% vote share), the Sikh-majority state is again in political flux. INDIA partners AAP and Congress are contesting each other. SAD has stayed away from both alliances; its junior partner till 2020, BJP, isn't seen as a threat beyond a handful of seats.

Politics 1984-2024 | The vote on June 1 is when army action on Darbar Sahib began in 1984 - which remains the biggest turning point for Sikhs and Punjab after Partition. In Parliament last Aug, PM called it an "attack on Akal Takht". The mass tragedies, including massacre of Sikhs in 1984 - that Modi called "genocide" while campaigning in Punjab in 2019 and this year too - influenced poll outcomes in Parliament and assembly elections in Punjab till 1998. With Sikh votes consolidated, Congress was viewed as an 'anti-Sikh' party. SAD emerged strong.

POLLITICS
Special Series on Elections
Forty years on, Punjab is at a political crossroads again. SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal, desperate to regain lost ground among Sikhs over the handling of sacrilege issues and police firing that killed two during 2015's Sikh protests, at every poll meeting pulls out a picture of damaged Akal Takht from 1984, and talks of RSS taking control of gurdwara bodies outside Punjab. His call is to defeat parties controlled from Delhi.

Parties in position | Punjab Congress claims it'll gain from anti-incumbency against AAP. It convinced party brass in Delhi against an alliance in Punjab. But if indeed Congress makes gains, it'll be more because of

weaknesses of other parties. Congress even lost its strongest seat Jalandhar to AAP in a 2023 bypoll. Most Sikhs remain apprehensive of BJP; Congress, ironically, expects to benefit from this.

AAP had won big from discontent with Congress and SAD-BJP and bragged its *aam aadmi* candidates defeated the CM and three former CMs. But among its 13 candidates this time, AAP has three imports, five ministers, three MLAs, and a Punjab comic-actor. Known for contesting even local body elections in Kejriwal's name, Punjab AAP has been campaigning in Bhagwant Mann's name this time. Their party's 'saviour' is the scheme of 300 units of free power.

This time, perception that BJP will alter the Constitution has seeped into Dalit minds. BJP's been pushing to make Punjab a four-cornered contest, but it can grow only if it decimates Congress. While farmers are protesting against BJP nominees, a counter-consolidation of Hindu votes can't be ruled out.

Protests, anti-incumbency |

Ahead of 2022, AAP cashed in on the political fluidity resulting from the farmers' movement. But within three months it lost its rajdhani, Sangrur, to SAD president Simranjit Singh Mann in a bypoll. Recently, Mann faced shopkeepers and traders' ire in Maur assembly segment during a roadshow. A blast in Maur had killed 7 just four days ahead of the 2017 assembly election. It was traced to Dera Sacha Sauda Sirda - but all parties remained silent as did police brass.

After winning the 2017 assembly election, Congress had won 8 seats (41%

vote share) in 2019 LS polls. But AAP has started facing questions on issues of performance within two years of its assembly win. Farm crisis, unemployment, depleting water table, drugs, youth out-migration, illegal mining, increasing debt - real people's issues are all missing from the political discourse.

Panthic space on edge | No political party can claim to control the narrative. The response to radical Sikh activist Amritpal Singh, who's contesting from Khadoor Sahib constituency, shows resistance can emerge even without a clear political structure.

A turf war between moderate and radical streams is at play. The traction Amritpal has is more a reflection of turmoil within the Sikh political space than any love of a radical agenda. Perception of excessive action against him and the persisting drugs crisis are working to his advantage. Conversions by Pentecostal pastors are also helping radicals. Simranjit Singh Mann is very much in play from Sangrur. Indira Gandhi assassin Beant Singh's son Sarabjit Singh, an Independent, has significant support in Faridkot.

All this is unfolding at a time when the main parties no longer talk of justice for the Bargari sacrilege, or Behbal Kalan police firing cases. AAP rode these issues to rock the Congress boat ahead of 2022 assembly polls.

Punjab votes on June 1 (13 seats)

Calvin & Hobbes



Consciousness Is Brain's User-Illusion Of Itself

Pranav Khullar

The Cartesian notion of consciousness and the relation between the body and mind has been at the heart of modern Western thought, with Descartes positing consciousness as the one undeniable and certain fact of existence. Modern scientific propositions of a unified field theory further dissolved the distance between the observer and the observed, proposing an indivisible consciousness running through mind-body, space-time, and energy-matter.

Daniel Dennett challenged this Cartesian concept. He lays down a purely materialistic physical paradigm of consciousness through a dissection of the physical human brain and mental phenomena. In laying down this model of consciousness, *heterophenomenology*, as he calls it, where a scientific methodology alone is applied to

studying consciousness, Dennett argues against a Cartesian central point where conscious experience occurs. Instead, he posits a 'multiple drafts' model of consciousness, in which consciousness arises from the interplay of several physical and cognitive processes in the brain.

Viewing the mind in terms of information processing, Dennett compares consciousness to the user interface of a computer. Dennett's computer-interface model of consciousness sees all states of awareness and emotions as memory imprints brought about by physical processes, just as one brings alive the icons on the computers from its intricate software circuitry. Overturning Descartes' idea of an immaterial soul or mind, Dennett views the human mind and consciousness as a

brain-computer operating a series of algorithmic permutations.

He contends that the human brain's billion neurons are warring with each other for influence over our brain's circuitry, with the 'winner neurons' influencing our perceptions and actions. The contents of our consciousness are an edit of the real world, just the 'winner-neurons' setting the narrative out of countless innumerable possibilities. This conscious experience is just an offshoot of the 'winner-neurons' being imprinted into memory.

He then contends that all humans end up experiencing *user-illusion*. Just as the visual metaphor of a desktop computer creates the illusion of a simplified version of computing but masks the underlying complexity of the computer, our individual conscious

experience, too, is similarly a simplification of the complex reality. While this allows us to act normally in the world, it is 'the brain's user-illusion of itself'. The subject's view is no longer taken as authoritative or accurate since that view only describes things as they *seem* to the subject.

This notion of consciousness as an illusion arises from his larger philosophical conviction in the Darwinian theory of evolution by natural selection, which he contended accounts for all dimensions of human existence and behaviour. One does not need a personal God, 'an intelligent designer', or an immaterial soul.

In upholding this Darwinian idea that all creatures, including human beings, were created by a series of unsigned and unintentional mutations, Dennett sees this 'Tree of Life' as an affirmation of the 'magnificence of creation'.

Sacred space



He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Becomings, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere oneness.

Isha Upanishad

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