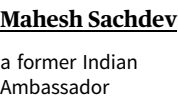




Whatever is being done post-facto, is ultimately too little, too late. Methanol, also a form of alcohol, is added to moonshine to increase its strength. It is a potent poison, and even in very small quantities, can cause liver failure, blindness, and death. While various governments have shifted the State's position on allowing or banning the brewing of arrack, one measure that seemed to have controlled deaths due to hooch after its introduction was selling low-cost liquor through TASMAL in 2002. That year, methanol was brought under the ambit of the Tamil Nadu Prohibition Act, and rules were amended to control methanol supply. However, in the light of Kallakurichi, it seems methanol flows freely. There can be no complacency about bringing the culprits to book. The government needs to shut down the small-scale industry of illicit brewing in the State, and should also expressly work towards increasing public health awareness on the inherent dangers of drinking hooch.

## The GST Council must not dither any further on pending reforms

This is, therefore, an opportune time for the Council, which is meeting this Saturday, to press the pedal on its pending reform agenda to make it a truly Good and Simple Tax as originally envisaged. Meeting for the first time since last October, the Council may have much routine work on its plate, including clarifications related to, and reviews of, past decisions such as the 28% levy on online games and casinos. However, it is hoped the Council will also find time for bigger things such as reviving the plan to rationalise GST's complex, multiple-rate structure. A ministerial group, tasked with this agenda since 2021, must be asked to restart its work expeditiously. A new rate structure might also entail lower levies on items such as cement and insurance, for instance. A road map is also needed to bring excluded items such as electricity, natural gas, and petroleum products into the GST net to ensure businesses can avail credits for these inputs. Along with easing compliances for smaller firms as promised in the Bharatiya Janata Party's election manifesto, there is room for simplifying the system for all businesses, including large ones which are compelled to register in each State and face varying compliance diktats. Not all of this can be discussed in one go. So, it is most critical that the Council, which is usually expected to meet every quarter but has been convened just six times since 2022, resolves to meet more often.



While the precise economic underpinnings of the incipient SAA are not known, they are likely to be quite substantive. Although the U.S. is no longer dependent on Saudi oil supplies, the two sides are unlikely to abandon their long-standing coordination to balance the global market between the U.S. need for cheaper energy with a Saudi quest for higher oil revenue. The SAA is

The proposed Strategic Alliance Agreement may have been forced by Washington's fear of losing Riyadh

**A.S. Panneerselvan**  
a fellow of the Roja  
Muthiah Research  
Library, Chennai

When the Sena refused to concede the primacy in the State, the alliance broke. The BJP formed the government in Maharashtra, with Devendra Fadnavis as Chief Minister, which accelerated the downward slide. When the Sena managed to gain power by forming a post-poll alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Indian National Congress in 2019, the BJP ensured a split in both the regional parties, namely the NCP and the Sena, and had their

In its political alignments, the Bharatiya Janata Party reaps a political fortune while its alliance partners stare at losses

The second major obstacle that the SAA faces is the ongoing Gaza conflict which has made it politically inopportune for Riyadh to agree to any reconciliation with Israel. This is also important from the Biden administration's perspective as the SAA would require the U.S. Senate approval by two-thirds which can only follow a Riyadh-Tel Aviv détente. But if any progress is to be made in

The quest for the SAA has become a time-bound contest between an irresistible force and an immovable object. We can only speculate on the likely impact of the likely scenarios. In case a fully formatted SAA is signed, it would reimpose unipolarity (Pax Americana) onto the Gulf and much of West Asia. Pro-West regimes will gain more confidence and the Palestinian cause would be given a facile burial. If the quest for the SAA fails, the region will stay in turmoil and the non-state actors promoted by Iran will keep disrupting the regional equilibrium. The region would remain a chessboard for outside powers. There is also a possibility that if Gaza peace remains elusive, having come this far, Riyadh and Washington may reluctantly agree to a truncated piecemeal agreement, bringing in other friendly countries to fill it up.

India, a large neighbour of the region with well-known stakes in the region, needs to watch the emerging Grand Bargain carefully. An SAA would be in India's overall interest as it would hopefully enhance regional stability, create economic opportunities, promote the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and free the U.S. to follow its Indo-Pacific Strategy more vigorously. At the same time, India needs to pursue its own "Act West" policy without waiting for a third iconic image of Israeli and Saudi leaders shaking hands at Camp David.

The story of the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) is illustrative as the Assam party has been in on-alliance-off-alliance mode with the BJP since 2001. The AGP was forced to witness one of its important leaders, Sarbananda Sonowal, being absorbed into the BJP and being anointed as the Chief Minister. He is now a part of the BJP-led NDA's Union Cabinet. The AGP was the dominant player when the alliance was established, but within two decades, the BJP has become the key player. In the just concluded Lok Sabha election, the BJP has won nine seats while the AGP won just one, out of the 14 seats in Assam.

This story has regional variations when it comes to the fortune of four other regional political parties: the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagam (AIADMK). These parties extended vital numerical support to the BJP in its push to

It is evident that the BJP takes over the strengths of the parties it allies with and transfers its own weakness onto them. Its embrace is often seen as a fatal embrace. One is only left with a question. Can the JD(U) and the TDP now escape the deadly embrace?

Even as the storm caused by irregularities in this year's NEET has still to settle, comes another bombshell (Page 1, "UGC-NET cancelled, CBI probe ordered", June 20). While fairness, integrity and transparency should be the

guiding factors in such high-profile tests, it is unfortunate that gaps are being discovered much after these tests are held. It is deeply disheartening for lakhs of genuine aspirants. An overhaul of the organisations which are mandated to conduct such

## The toxic liquor tragedy in

Tamil Nadu is shocking. There needs to be a proper investigation. The DMK government is quick to talk about its 'Dravidian model' as having helped it achieve top spot in social development/welfare programmes. But the toxic liquor deaths in the State

It does not require rocket science to unearth who is behind the spurious liquor trade and the vending points. Every police officer would know what and

where to tap for information. The government needs to protect the lives of the ordinary man, who is usually the most affected in such incidents and who has no social or safety nets.

**A. Thirugnanasambantham,**  
Coimbatore



# Should not EVs and Hybrids be treated equally for govt. subsidies?



**Avinash Kumar Agarwal**

Director, IIT Jodhpur and the lead author of a study comparing greenhouse gas emissions of battery, hybrid and ICE vehicles



**Sharvari Patki**

Program Head, Electric Mobility at the World Resources Institute, India

## PARLEY

India's road transport sector contributes about 12% to the country's CO2 emissions, according to the International Energy Agency, making it the third most greenhouse gas emitting sector after energy and agriculture. The Union government has been attempting to fast track decarbonising transport for almost a decade with the introduction of the Faster Adoption and Manufacture of Hybrid and Electric Vehicles, or FAME in 2015. The third iteration of this policy is likely to be announced in this year's Union Budget. FAME attempts to generate demand for electric vehicles (EVs) and hybrids by subsidising retail sales, encouraging the manufacture of components and creating and nurturing an EV ecosystem nationwide. But the policy has changed from when it was introduced, with a steady removal of subsidies for hybrids. Some have welcomed this move, while others point to the lack of charging infrastructure, import dependence on advanced battery components and technology, and a grid still dominated by coal-based power, leading to an increase in EVs overall carbon footprint from mining rare earth elements to charging. Professor Avinash Kumar Agarwal and Sharvari Patki discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Kunal Shankar**. Edited excerpts:

**The government in 2017, withdrew the subsidy support for “mild hybrids” affecting popular car models. Moreover, this segment took advantage of about 65% of the subsidy component at the time. How do you view this decision by the Centre?**

**Sharvari Patki:** About 90% of emissions in transport are from road transport and 20% of this from passenger cars. Now put hybrids in perspective. Currently, two-wheelers constitute 75% of our vehicle sales and three-wheelers another 4%, so together they are almost 80% of vehicle sales. The EV market has already solved major operational issues in these segments. The majority of success in EV transition is seen in these two categories. When we look at commercial vehicles – primarily freight vehicles – they are just 5% of the overall vehicle population, but they alone contribute 34% of emissions, yet we do not have the hybrid truck discussion on the table. If we remove this major chunk and then we come to passenger cars, hybrids are a small portion of this. I am counting strong hybrids because they offer almost 25-30% fuel efficiency compared with internal combustion engines (ICE). But the models cost approximately ₹30 lakh apiece, making them fall under the luxury car segment. We don't need to provide incentives for people who are buying



An electric car. GETTY IMAGES

cars worth ₹30-40 lakh. If we go back to the genesis of FAME, it was to move towards emissions-free energy efficient India. We understand that in the policy space, there is no silver bullet. You have to keep evolving as the ecosystem evolves. If I go back to 2015 when early electric cars were launched in India, we had a range of around 120 kilometres, but in the past years, we have indigenous cars, offering 350 to 400 kilometers on a single charge and with zero emissions. We don't have an infinite amount of taxpayers' money. The limited pot has to be given to help transition towards energy-efficient and emissions-free India. That means we have to understand where we are getting maximum value for our incentives. I think the government is cognisant of this and has accordingly changed the incentive patterns.

**Avinash Kumar Agarwal:** I think Sharvari has made very nice points. I would slightly differ with her on certain aspects. I would like to question the idea of a zero-emissions vehicle anywhere in the world. You need some primary source of energy and in India, more than 75% of electricity is produced from coal. And if you look at the average per kWh that you are charging, there is a certain emission that you are emitting into the environment. So when you evaluate and make policies on ICE versus hybrids versus electric, I must ask, am I getting the kind of emission reductions that I am looking for? To assess this, we looked at the car segment in a recently published report. We had looked at two-wheelers earlier. This report is available freely on the website of IIT Kanpur. When you talk about the sustainability of any technology, you have three aspects – the life cycle emission analysis, or LCA, per kilometer usage of a vehicle right from production, mining and recycling and how much emission you are emitting into the environment, and finally, an



Policies must evolve with the changing sectoral landscape. We must aim towards zero-emissions vehicles because that will help us reach our climate and energy security goals

**SHARVARI PATKI**

important aspect especially in the Indian context is the total cost of ownership or TCO. This gives us total emissions, cost per kilometer and then of course there is a social sustainability aspect, which is more of a qualitative number. So let's just focus on LCA and TCO. When we did this analysis for many of the cars which are being sold in India, from the Indian players and players with foreign origin, our estimates suggest, in most cases, emissions from electric are higher than ICE vehicles, and certainly more than hybrid vehicles. The tendency we have in India is to consider emissions and cost only from the charging phase. So we say ₹1 per kilometer and give these numbers only for the usage phase. But you don't put the cost of, say, for example, battery change. So we did this total cost of ownership for all these two power trains and then we figured in most cases, hybrids emerged to be best in terms of environmental impact, which means they were the least polluting of all the three power trains. And EVs were actually in some cases, even more polluting than ICE vehicles. This is a limited case that I'm making in the context of India, where 75% of the power is from carbon. So we find it difficult to digest when my EV enthusiast friends say that it is CO2 free, it is not. We also don't have the basic raw materials for making battery electric vehicles. You need large amounts of metals like cobalt, nickel and lithium. And so in hybrids, the advantage is that you can manage with a very small battery pack and their total cost of ownership is slightly higher because of the differential tax rate. Hybrids today are taxed even more than ICE vehicles.

**Although the GST on them has been proposed to be significantly reduced...**

**AKA:** Absolutely, but the government should look at the overall objective. They should not get into the business of choosing technology. You must specify life cycle emission and GHG norms, but when you start subsidising and start choosing, then technology development and progression actually stop. For a country like India, the subsidy is not sustainable because of the sheer numbers.

**We must contextualise this conversation in**

**the backdrop of the rapid deployment of renewables across India and the country's COP26 commitment to generate half of our power from non-fossil based sources and ramping up renewables capacity to 500 GW by 2030. What do you think?**

**SP:** As the professor rightly pointed out, today we don't have a completely clean grid, but this is going to change. We are striving to ensure our grid becomes greener and cleaner. But if we wait for our grid to become green and then start our transport transition, it might be too late. So there would be some overlap where both sectors' transition must go hand in hand. We will keep electrifying our transport, while we green our grid. And when we say zero emission, we completely understand we are talking about zero tail pipe emission. So in the interim scenario, when we are charging everything with coal, we can say that hybrid makes better sense. But again this depends on how many kilometers you are running, which is the use case, the vehicle class, etc. And when we consider energy efficiency, 100 units of energy in ICE versus 100 units of energy in EV, the majority of the energy we apply in ICE is not utilised for actual movement. Whereas, in EVs, the majority of energy is used in traction, so by default, I think EVs are more efficient. We must also understand when we do a TCO analysis, we don't consider the cost before tax. We consider what a user pays. So again, TCO calculations have many assumptions. How much fuel is used? How the charging is done and at what rate? For example, I come from Maharashtra. We have electric meters which offer us EV tariff at ₹5 and then the TCO changes drastically. So these are multiple things at play and I understand that we must ensure to push technologies which are effective overall and not in silos.

**As the government frames FAME 3, should it consider hybrids on an equal footing for subsidies?**

**AKA:** I think they should be at an equal footing. There should be no discrimination.

**SP:** I think we must consider multiple calculations and factors. Policies must evolve with the changing sectoral landscape. We must aim towards zero-emissions vehicles because that will help us reach our climate and energy security goals.



To listen to the full interview  
Scan the code or go to the link  
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## NOTEBOOK

### Trumpets, tears and elections: why do voters mislead

Voters sometimes deceive pollsters due to social pressures or mistrust, which can result in inaccurate election predictions

**Sobhana K. Nair**

At the end of each election season, there is always a closing parade of political experts and journalists blowing their trumpets and waving their “told you so” flags. Then there are those who have to eat crow. Some have the privilege to do so in private and some others, like the well respected pollster, end up weeping on national television.

Let's set the trumpets and tears aside for the moment to probe the very basic question – why do voters mislead? It is preposterous to assume that the voters owe the truth to pollsters or journalists. But more often than not, especially in the rural parts of the country, the voters open their hearts out, wearing their political preferences on their sleeves. And we need to be grateful for that. Many of us, wading into the treacherous waters of election predictions, have been victims of the “Bradley Effect.”

In 1982, Tom Bradley, an African-American long-time mayor of Los Angeles, ran as the Democratic Party's candidate for Governor of California against Republican candidate George Deukmejian, a white man of Armenian descent. Most polls in the final days before the election showed Bradley with a significant lead. Stunning the pollsters, Bradley lost the polls. A post-poll investigation found that many white voters who claimed they would vote for Bradley actually voted for Deukmejian. They told the surveyors the answer that they felt would be deemed to be more publicly acceptable and in this case, racially correct.

This election season, we saw our own “Bradley Effect” thanks to the fact that the media stands widely discredited. I have forgotten the number of times I had to field accusations that I was working on the payroll of the ruling party during this election season. The voters often assume the journalist or survey agency's political positions align with that of the ruling regime. One group of voters who particularly

confounded the surveyors and journalists were the Dalits. Several post-poll analysis have shown that Dalit voters, especially the non-Jatav sections beholden to the Bharatiya Janata Party in the last ten years, shifted their loyalties. The BJP's tally has been reduced to 55 seats (from 77 it won in 2019) out of the total 131 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes.

To lump all Dalit voters together is an oversimplification bordering on disrespect and a crime that we regularly indulge in the name of political analysis. Being at the bottom of the social pyramid, especially more so in villages, where caste hierarchies remain more or less intact, the Dalit voters usually remain reticent about their choices. At Belwara Chauraha, in Gorakhpur, ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, I met Awdesh Paswan, a local contractor. He and his friend had stopped by for a snack at the tea stall. As I prodded & probed Mr. Paswan and others sitting around, trying to steer the conversation toward their political preferences, several held forth on dissecting the pros and cons of the two main candidates in the fray. But Mr. Paswan remained silent. His parting words to me were, “Can't speak here, madam, at the chowk.” Instead, he chose to give me his phone number, so that he could speak his mind without fear of possible backlash. There are many like Mr. Paswan, who don't feel comfortable advertising their political picks. And, more often than not, the silent voters like him don't get counted, which leads to skewed predictions.

Though not an excuse, neither journalists nor survey agencies can afford to spend more time with voters like Mr. Paswan and be patient enough till they decide to open up.

The reason journalists had a better run than the pollsters in this season is because unlike the pollsters, whose straitjacket response forms run on data, we could spare a thought for intangibles such as silence.

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## PICTURE OF THE WEEK

### In the aftermath



Locals gather after a collision between the Kanchanjunga Express and a goods train, near Rangapani railway station, on June 17. At least 10 people were killed and 32 others suffered injuries, according to officials. PTI

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

**FIFTY YEARS AGO** JUNE 21, 1974

### Radio-Active fall out ever South Japan from China's test

Tokyo, June 20: An abnormally high level of radio-active fall-out believed to be from China's nuclear test this week was detected yesterday above Southern Japan, a Government spokesman said.

Eighteen Soviet TU 16 badger reconnaissance planes were spotted nine times flying over the Japan Sea off Japan from last evening to this morning apparently to check on the latest Chinese nuclear test,

## The ~~MOA~~ Hindu.

Japan's Defence Agency officials said.

The officials said the Soviet aircraft flew at an altitude of 9,600 metres to indicate that they were engaged in collecting radio-active fall-out.

China's latest nuclear explosion is aimed at “terrorising the weaker Asian countries and bringing them under its influence” according to the military observer of the Novosti Press Agency of the Soviet Union.

Outer Mongolia has lodged a strong protest against the nuclear test conducted by China, a broadcast by Ulan Bator Radio said today. The broadcast from the Outer Mongolia capital monitored in Tokyo said the atmospheric nuclear blast has caused “severe apprehension and anger” among the people of the country.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** JUNE 21, 1924

### Burma Chamber's view.

Rangoon, June 20: The Burma Chamber of Commerce received a letter from the Secretary to the Financial Commissioner. Burma, from which it appeared that the Government of Bengal are supporting the suggestion of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce that the Workmen's Compensation Insurance Policies should be stamped eight annas and the renewals four annas, and the receipts for compensation paid to the workers and that the agreements for lodgment with Commissioners should be exempted from Stamp duty, but the Government of India, holding the suggestion not suitable, for adoption, suggested that the duty of such policies should be regulated according to the amount of premium.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Government permits non-basmati rice exports to Africa

**2,000** tonnes. The government, through the National Cooperative Exports Limited, has permitted the export of 1,000 tonnes of non-basmati white rice to Malawi and Zimbabwe each. PTI

Number of members added to the EPFO in the month of April

**18.92** in lakh. Retirement fund body Employees' Provident Fund Organisation added record high net members in April, the highest since the first payroll data was published in 2018, the Labour Ministry said. PTI

Heatwave deaths between March 1 and June 18 this year

**114** deaths. The unrelenting heatwave sweeping large parts of the country has left more than 40,984 people grappling with suspected heatstroke, as per the Health Ministry. Uttar Pradesh is the worst-affected State reporting 37 deaths. PTI

The number of coal mines being auctioned by the MoC

**161** The Union Ministry of Coal and Mines (MoC), following Minister G. Krishan Reddy's directive, will expedite mining block exploration. The 10th round of auctions begins June 21. So far, 161 coal mines have been auctioned. PTI

The share of Indians who want stronger climate action

**77** in per cent. With 33% having recently experienced extreme weather events, a majority of Indians demand stronger climate action, according to The Peoples' Climate Vote 2024 survey. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## How dangerous is methanol poisoning?

What happened in the Kallakurichi district of Tamil Nadu? How is spurious liquor made and why does it have deadly effects? Why is methanol added to liquor and how is it processed by the body if ingested? Is treatment effective?

EXPLAINER

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

As of 9.30 p.m. on June 20, at least 38 people had died after consuming spurious liquor in the Kallakurichi district of Tamil Nadu while as many as 82 others were receiving treatment in hospitals. Immediately after news of the deaths broke, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin had the Collector transferred and the district superintendent of police suspended. The State has also deployed 2,000 police personnel around the district. The tragedy echoes a similar incident a year ago in the State's Chengalpattu and Villupuram districts, in which more than 20 people died after consuming spurious liquor. Liquor sales in Tamil Nadu are controlled by the State, through around 5,000 outlets.

What is the alcohol in liquor?

Liquor is differentiated by its alcohol content – from the 5% or so of beer to the 12% or so of wine to the 40% or so of distilled spirits (all by volume). In the beverages consumed for recreational purposes, the alcohol in question is almost always ethanol. In this context, ethanol is technically a psychoactive drug that, in low doses, reduces the level of neurotransmission in the body, leading to its typical intoxicating effects.

Contrary to popular belief, the World Health Organisation has found “no level of [its] consumption is safe for our health”. Long-term use leads to dependence, heightens the risk of some cancers and heart disease, and may eventually cause death.

Ethanol (C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH) is one carbon atom bonded to three hydrogen atoms and one more carbon atom; the second carbon atom is also bonded to two hydrogen atoms and the hydroxyl group, also known as the ion OH<sup>-</sup>. Inside the body, ethanol is metabolised in the liver and the stomach by alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH) enzymes to acetaldehyde. Then, acetaldehyde is transformed into acetate by aldehyde dehydrogenase (ALDH) enzymes. The adverse effects of alcohol consumption, from the hangover to a cancer, are due to acetaldehyde.

What is spurious liquor?

Spurious liquor is characterised by the liquid mixture containing methanol as well. The police were able to determine last year that the spurious liquor in both the Chengalpattu and Villupuram incidents arose from the same source, and that arrack sellers had purchased methanol from factories and sold it to the victims (Arrack is distilled from the fermented sap of the palm tree). Following the Kallakurichi incident, Mr. Stalin constituted a one-man commission headed by former High Court judge B. Gokuldas to inquire into the tragedy.

In many older cases, spurious liquor has typically been a homemade liquor to which methanol was added to strengthen the intoxicating effects (in colloquial parlance, its ‘kick’) and/or to increase its bulk volume. The Food Safety and Standards (Alcoholic Beverages) Regulations 2018 stipulate the maximum permissible quantity of methanol in different liquors. These values span a wide range, including “absent” in coconut fenny, 50 grams per 100 litres of country liquor, and 300 grams per 100 litres of pot-distilled spirits.

What is methanol?

The methanol molecule (CH<sub>3</sub>OH) consists



Tragic event: The bodies of victims who died after consuming spurious liquor being cremated at Karunapuram in Kallakurichi on June 20. KUMAR S.S.

of one carbon atom bonded with three hydrogen atoms and one hydroxyl group.

Schedule I of the Manufacture, Storage and Import of Hazardous Chemical Rules, 1989 includes methanol. The Indian Standard IS 517 applies to how the quality of methanol is to be ascertained and, together with the Tamil Nadu Denatured Spirit, Methyl Alcohol, and Varnish (French Polish) Rules 1959, what signage methanol packaging should carry.

The most common way to produce methanol is to combine carbon monoxide and hydrogen in the presence of copper and zinc oxides as catalysts at 50-100 atm of pressure and 250° C. In the pre-industrial era, going back to ancient Egypt, people made methanol (together with several other byproducts) by heating wood to a very high temperature.

Methanol has several industrial applications, including as a precursor to acetic acid, formaldehyde, and aromatic hydrocarbons. It is also used as a solvent and as antifreeze. In Tamil Nadu, the manufacture, trade, storage, and sale of methanol requires licences under the 1959 Rules.

How does spurious liquor kill?

The deadliness of spurious liquor arises from methanol. James Manor, emeritus professor of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, wrote in December 2022, “In every hooch tragedy in the history of India - and of the world since 1945 - the poison has been methanol.” The human body contains infinitesimal quantities of methanol (4.5 ppm in the breath of healthy individuals, per a 2006 study) as a result of eating some fruits. But even for an adult, more than 0.1 ml of pure methanol per kilogram of body-weight can be devastating.

Once ingested, ADH enzymes metabolise methanol in the liver to form formaldehyde (H-CHO). Then ALDH enzymes convert formaldehyde to formic acid (HCOOH). The accumulation of formic acid over time leads to a condition called metabolic acidosis, which can lead to acidemia: when the blood's pH drops below its normal value of 7.35, becoming increasingly acidic. The blood's pH is normally maintained by a balance between an acid, like carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), and a base, like the bicarbonate ion (HCO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>). The ‘metabolic’ in ‘metabolic acidosis’ means the concentration of the bicarbonate ion is dropping, leading to the acid gaining the upper hand. Formic acid also interferes with an enzyme called cytochrome oxidase, disrupting cells’ ability to use oxygen and leading to the build-up of lactic acid and contributing to acidosis.

According to a paper published by the journal *Archives of Toxicology* in January 2022, consuming methanol also leads to “methanol-induced optic neuropathy ..., a serious condition that may result in long-term or irreversible visual impairment or even blindness [due to] damage and loss of function of the optic nerve and retina”. This consequence “shows a tendency to occur as mass poisonings around the world with a clear predilection for poor societies in developing countries,” it added. Methanol-poisoning can also cause cerebral edema, haemorrhage, and death.

How can methanol-poisoning be treated?

Once methanol is ingested, the body takes some time to completely eliminate it. One estimate suggests as much as 33% is still left behind after 48 hours. It is completely absorbed via the gastrointestinal tract.

And blood methanol level can reach its maximum value within 90 minutes.

There are two immediate ways to treat methanol poisoning. One is to administer pharmaceutical-grade ethanol. This may sound counter-intuitive but ethanol competes very well with methanol for the ADH enzymes, which metabolise ethanol around 10x faster. As a result, the methanol is kept from being metabolised to formaldehyde.

The other option is to administer an antidote called fomepizole, which has a similar mechanism: it slows the action of the ADH enzymes, causing the body to produce formaldehyde at a rate the body can quickly excrete, preventing the deadlier effects from kicking in.

Both courses of action are limited by availability: fomepizole is expensive whereas pharmaceutical-grade ethanol needs to be administered under expert supervision. Healthcare workers may also have the individual undergo a dialysis to remove methanol and formic acid salts from the blood, and mitigate damage to the kidneys and the retina.

They may also administer folinic acid, which encourages the formic acid to break up into carbon dioxide and water. Both fomepizole and folinic acid are in the WHO's list of essential medicines.

The formic acid would have begun accumulating in dangerous amounts around 18-24 hours after ingestion, affecting the optic nerve, kidneys, the heart, and the brain. Ophthalmic effects have been observed in 50% of those who have consumed methanol, and they become apparent within 24 hours.

If the individual consumed ethanol along with the methanol, the damage may not be evident until after a few days, further delaying treatment and increasing mortality.

THE GIST

At least 38 people had died after consuming spurious liquor in the Kallakurichi district of Tamil Nadu.

The deadliness of spurious liquor arises from methanol. James Manor, emeritus professor of Commonwealth Studies at the University of London, wrote in December 2022, “In every hooch tragedy in the history of India - and of the world since 1945 - the poison has been methanol.”

More than 0.1 ml of pure methanol per kilogram of body-weight can be devastating. Methanol-poisoning can also cause cerebral edema, haemorrhage, and death.



IN THE LIMELIGHT

Why Shankar’s legacy goes beyond mere grandeur

With Shankar’s ‘Indian 2’ all set for release in less than a month, we look at the pioneering efforts that make the veteran filmmaker’s work not just distinguishable, but also a benchmark yet to be surpassed

Gopinath Rajendran

2021 marked the 25th year of *Indian* – Kamal Haasan and director Shankar’s first collaboration – about which V.T. Vijayan, one of the editors of the cult classic, once shared an interesting anecdote. In the now iconic ‘Telephone Manipol’ song, Shankar wanted Manisha Koirala and Kamal’s faces to be transposed on the dancing penguins, but due to time constraints, they could not pull it off. Shankar, who seemed to be aware of the challenges that came with VFX back in the late 90s – given that the film depended on a lot of visual effects to pull off the two characters played by Kamal – had also shot scenes of the lead characters playing with penguins which ended up in the film. Three years later, Shankar’s imagination took shape in *Mudhalvan*’s ‘Mudhalvanae’ song in which the film’s characters appear as snakes.

**Pushing boundaries**  
Past the *brahmendam* (grandeur) his films have become synonymous with, there’s more to Shankar’s films than lavish sets, exotic locations and idealist tropes. With a career spanning more than 30 years, after assisting filmmakers like Pavithran and S. A. Chandrasekhar, Shankar made his directorial debut with *Gentleman* in 1993. Though *Gentleman* is not a film one would often associate with the magnificence Shankar later became known for, even in his debut flick, the young filmmaker wanted to push the boundaries of filmmaking and incorporate technology. The iconic A.R. Rahman song ‘Chikku Bukku Rayile’ was initially supposed to be a bus song, but ended up being a train song; what often goes unnoticed is how difficult it would have been to shoot in an actual moving train at night. And who can forget the animated tears and arrows from the song? If Shankar’s technical prowess and command over technology rose in *Gentleman*, it began taking baby steps in his sophomore *Kadhalan*. Prabhu Deva shooting arrows in ‘Chikku Bukku Rayile’ was a precursor for what we had in store with ‘Mukkala Mukkabila’, in which he turns into an ‘invisible man’ and in ‘Ennavale Adi Ennavale’ where his 2-dimensional ‘soul’ picks up his lady love’s equivalent and the two fly from an auditorium in Chennai to the hills of Kulu Manali! The grandeur, like the glass framed bus for ‘Urvasi Urvasi’, spilled over to the film as well with Mysore’s famous Lalitha Mahal being shown as the female lead’s house. Also, *Kadhalan* was the last film to be given access to shoot inside the Chidambaram Nataraja Temple. But it was with his third film *Indian* that Shankar’s imagination and quest for resplendence really took wings. The biggest film of his career at that moment with one of the biggest stars of the Indian film industry, Shankar not only upped the ante with songs (‘Akadanu Naanga’ and ‘Maya Machindra’) but also with the feature film itself. Starring Kamal in dual roles, the film had several scenes featuring both characters on screen – and at times even overlapping each other – and complex editing patterns like composing multiple layers. Hollywood make-up artists Michael Westmore and



A still from *Sivaji: The Boss*.

Michael Jones were brought in to design the now-famous “Indian thatha” look.

**Going over and above**  
In his next four films – *Jeans*, *Mudhalvan*, its Hindi remake *Nayak*, and *Boys* – Shankar continued with his share of slice-of-life movies and films on co-occurring social issues with vigilante themes. Unsurprisingly, his use of VFX and shooting at exotic locales took a new leap. The ‘Poovukkul’ song in *Jeans* showed us several wonders of the world, while ‘Kannodu Kaanbadhellam’ featured two Aishwarya Rais simultaneously dancing on screen with visual effects. A favourite trivia is how the dinosaur that magically appears to wish the lead couple in the last scene, is a reused clip from Jurassic Park’s iconic shot! In *Mudhalvan*, Shankar kept the visual effects magic to the songs and opted for realism; however, its cinematographer (and late director) K.V. Anand called the Anna Salai riot sequence as one of the most challenging shots of his career. Even a coming-of-age film like *Boys* had a song, ‘Ale Ale’ which featured the time freeze technology, made famous by films like *The Matrix*, that was achieved by linking 62 cameras to create one seamless shot. The filmmaker would go on to push the boundaries of the time freeze technology for an action sequence in *Anniyan*. If that did not make the shot challenging enough, it also had 127 professionally trained fighters from Vietnam and involved extensive rope work. If the *Boys*

bullet time shot had 62 cameras achieving a 180° rotation, in *Ammyan*, Shankar used 122 cameras for a 270° rotation which were rendered by the VFX studio Big Freeze in London. As for the songs, ‘Kumari’ was shot at a large tulip garden in Vijfhuizen near Amsterdam, while ‘Kannum Kannum Nokia’ was shot at the Nokia Headquarters in Espoo, Finland, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Petronas Towers. *Sivaji: The Boss*, Shankar’s first collaboration with Rajinikanth, became the first Tamil film to enter the 100-crore box office collection club. Technically, *Sivaji* was the first Indian film to use Dolby Atmos surround sound technology; similarly, K.V. Anand used balloon lights brought from the French company Airstar Space Lighting to shoot an action sequence in an open-air theatre at night. But once again, it was the songs where the visionary in Shankar sparked the most. For ‘Vaaji Vaaji’, art director Thota Tharani made a Babylonian palace, and for ‘Sahana’, he created a glass house. Keeping with shooting at exotic locations abroad for songs, the ‘Style’ song was shot at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. However, the location was not the highlight as Shankar had another trick up his sleeve. The song featured a fair-skinned version of Rajinikanth, which was achieved with CGI. Every single movement of Rajinikanth had to be shot again with a British woman and her skin colour was digitally implemented onto

that of Rajinikanth’s. What started in the early 2000s as *Robot*, a techno-thriller set in a future Chennai starring Kamal and Preity Zinta, turned into *Enthiran* in 2010 with Rajinikanth and Aishwarya Rai. Shankar, who loved toying with technology, aided by the film’s genre, went to town creating a benchmark for Indian sci-fi films. U.S.-based special effects studio Legacy Effects, the company behind practical effects for films like *Avatar*, *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, *Life of Pi* and *Pacific Rim*, took *Enthiran* as their first international project. Previsualisation technique was used in 40 out of the 60 visual effects scenes and it consisted of 2,000 takes with the pre-production work alone taking one and a half years. For creating robots with Rajini’s appearance, Doom Light Stage systems were used to scan his face in 3D digital format. A mannequin made by a Legacy Effects team of 100 technicians in Los Angeles was used as Chitti the robot, and six puppeteers were brought in to control its movements. Once again, for the songs, it was the ruins of the Incan city of Machu Picchu in Peru for ‘Kilimanjaro’ and Lençóis Maranhenses National Park in northeastern Brazil for ‘Kadhal Anukkal’. After a tryst with a remake in the form of *Nanban*, Shankar returned to making a big-screen extravaganza with *I* starring Vikram. This time, he worked with the New Zealand-based special effects studio Wētā Workshop and even met director Peter Jackson. Hong Kong martial arts choreographer and director of classics like *Drunken Master* starring Jackie Chan, Yuen Woo-ping, was brought in as a stunt co-ordinator. Here, Shankar chose Red Seabeach in Panjin and Li River in Guilin, China to shoot the ‘Pookkalae’ song. Shankar then opted for sci-fi once again and did his first standalone sequel, 2.0, reuniting with Rajinikanth. The filmmaker teamed up with Legacy Effects and 2.0 became the first Indian film to be natively shot in 3D. *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Batman Returns* costume designer Mary E. Vogt, stunt choreographer Kenny Bates and visual effects specialists John Hughes and Walt Jones of Tau Films were also brought in. The film reportedly had 1,000 visual effects shots making it the most expensive Indian film during its release.

**Real life inspirations**  
Past the grandeur and impeccable visual imagery, Shankar’s films have majorly stuck to contemporary issues with real-life incidents adding inspirations to his tropes. If it was the cold war between the then-Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalithaa and Marri Chenna Reddy in *Kadhalan*, the botched brain surgery in *Jeans* is said to be inspired by a true incident involving late-actor Sriveidi’s mother. *Mudhalvan*’s idea was inspired by the Nixon-Frost interviews as well as actor Sivaji Ganesan being named the honorary mayor of Niagara Falls, New York for one day. His *Enthiran*’s Chitti is often compared with the titular character of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein* while *I* had similarities to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Beauty and the Beast*. The filmmaker also worked extensively with writers like Balakumaran, Sujatha, Subha, B. Jeyamohan, Lakshmi Saravanakumar, Kabilan Vairamuthu and Madhan Karky, and his upcoming film is written by director Karthik Subbaraj. It’s been 31 years since Shankar made his debut and each one of his films stands as a testimony to his impeccable and audacious vision. Some of his films might have not aged well – predominantly because of their underlying themes and authoritarian tone – but that does not take away the impact of his attention towards making a film which has inspired a whole new generation of filmmakers to dream big.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Origin of the word O.K. (Sheila Jacob, New Delhi)”  
“O.K. is American in origin. Although it is a commonly used word, nobody is really sure how the word came into being. Several theories have been put forward; each more colourful than the other. One of the claims made is that O.K. has been borrowed from an Indian language – not Bharatia Indian, but American Indian. Some feel that the word has been borrowed from the Choctaw tribe who used the word ‘okeh’ to mean ‘it is so.’ President Woodrow Wilson believed in this theory and he always spelt the word ‘okeh.’  
Another view is that it dates back to the U.S. Presidential race of 1840. The Democrats wanted their candidate, Martin Van Buren, to be re-elected for a second term. So they formed the ‘Democratic O.K. Club.’ The O.K. stood for Old Kinderhook, a village in New York State where Van Buren was born. The members of this club were called O.K.’s. The O.K.s were merely a bunch of rowdies and their job was to break up the meetings of the rival party – the Whigs. They did such a good job disrupting meetings that their activities were constantly reported in the newspapers. This constant reference helped to keep the word O.K. alive.

The names of Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States and Obadiah Kelly have been linked with this word. The story goes that when Jackson was a court clerk in Tennessee, he used to write ‘O.K.’ on the legal documents he had gone through. The O.K. was merely an abbreviation for ‘orl korrect’ which was Jackson’s spelling of ‘all correct’. The story about Jackson’s misspelling has been written about so often that many people believe it.  
Obadiah Kelly, whose name has also been associated with this word, was a clerk in the railways. Whenever he received a parcel for shipment, he always wrote ‘O.K.’ on it. There are different interpretations of the initials. Some say, it stood for his name, while others maintain that like Andrew Jackson, the railway clerk used the initials to mean ‘orl korrect.’

During the mid 19th century, American humourists deliberately started to misspell words. This was because these authors made illiterates heroes of their stories. So words like ‘all correct’ were spelt ‘orl korrect.’ It was also fashionable during this time to reduce words and phrases to their initials. A boy might say to a girl ‘O.K.K.B.W.P.’ to mean ‘one kind kiss before we part.’ So it is quite possible that the misspelt ‘orl korrect’ was reduced to ‘O.K.’ Though American in origin, O.K. is used by speakers of English all over the world. There was a time when the English people used to look down on anyone who said O.K. In other words, it was ‘nokay’ with them. Now, O.K. is O.K. with all. O.K. is also spelt okay and okey. It can be used as a verb also. His proposal was not okayed. Is my explanation of o.k., okey or is it ‘nokay’? ‘No-Kay’ meaning ‘not o.k.’ is used by some jocularly. You will not find the word in dictionaries.”  
Published in *The Hindu* on June 16, 1992.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Some significant events occurred on June 21. Here is a quiz on observances, birthdays and everything else that happened on the day

Abhinava. K

- QUESTION 1**  
A book which is part of a popular best-selling series was released on this date in 2003. The book prominently features one of the most hated characters from the series. Black quill, educational decree no 27 and a prophecy are some of the interesting elements from the book. Identify the series and the book.
- QUESTION 2**  
This Prime Minister, who was sworn in on June 21, 1991, was the first Congress PM outside the Gandhi-Nehru family. He was also posthumously awarded the Bharat Ratna, India’s highest civilian award recently. Name the Prime Minister.
- QUESTION 3**  
June 21 is celebrated as the International Day of Yoga. When did the United Nations General Assembly adopt a resolution to this effect?
- QUESTION 4**  
India will experience the summer solstice on June 21. The summer solstice marks the event when the Sun is at its southernmost position to Earth’s equator. Is the statement true?
- QUESTION 5**  
This American whistleblower, who was born on this day, became a naturalised Russian citizen in 2022. His book is called *Permanent Record*. Identify the person.



**Visual question:**  
The Ferris wheel was launched on June 21, 1893 to great success. Name the event it debuted in and the place. EMMANUAL YOGINI

**Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:** 1. This player played 193 games without winning a championship. **Ans: Karl Malone**  
2. This player holds the record for winning the most rings in the NBA. **Ans: Bill Russell**  
3. Name the former Los Angeles Lakers and Miami Heat coach whose record Mazzula broke. **Ans: Pat Riley**  
4. The common link between Indiana Pacers, Memphis Grizzlies, Los Angeles Clippers, Phoenix Suns etc. **Ans: These are the teams that have never won the NBA championship**  
5. The last NBA team to win a repeat championship. **Ans: The Golden State Warriors in 2017 and 2018**  
Visual: Identify this player. **Ans: Robert Horry**  
**Early Birds:** K. N. Viswanathan| Niharbala Behera| Abhinav Raj| Sadhan Kumar Panda| Ayushman

Word of the day

**Dulcify:**  
make sweeter in taste

**Synonyms:** sweeten, edulcorate

**Usage:** *He used honey to dulcify his tea.*

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/dulcifypro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /dʌlsɪfaɪ/

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







## Ruling the charts

AI is fuelling Nvidia's rise

The evolution of Nvidia from game-chip designer to the world's most valuable company is not accidental. It is directly connected to its expertise in designing semiconductors that are good at intensive number-crunching. The timeline is straightforward. ChatGPT was publicly released in November 2022, sparking a frenzy of artificial intelligence (AI) development. In 2023, Nvidia more than doubled revenues to \$60.9 billion as its chips became the hottest commodity in the world. Nvidia's net profits expanded six times to \$29.7 billion. The company's market capitalisation crossed \$1 trillion for the first time in May 2023 and it has tripled in the next 13 months. Nvidia is unusual in that it is a chip-maker that doesn't make chips. It designs specialised semiconductors, which are manufactured to specification by contract fabricators. It is even open to having its chips manufactured by foundries owned by rivals like Intel.

Nvidia's initial focus was the gaming market and it remains the dominant player with around an 80 per cent market share in gaming. Gaming created a demand for co-processors (also called graphics processing units or GPUs) to handle complex calculations for image-rendering, while leaving the central processing unit (CPU) free to handle less calculation-heavy tasks. AI requires similar but even more intensive processing by GPUs and Nvidia's expertise has helped it become a leader in AI. Apart from expertise in chip design, the company has unusual characteristics in terms of corporate culture. It has a small workforce for a trillion-dollar corporation with fewer than 30,000 employees. Among other trillion-dollar concerns, Microsoft has more than 220,000 employees, while Apple has a headcount of over 160,000 and Google more than 180,000.

Its name derives from wordplay on "Next Version" and "Invidia", which is the Latin word for envy. For many years, internal messaging from its President and Chief Executive Officer Jensen Huang always started with a warning: "Our company is thirty days from going out of business." This was actually the case in 1997, when Nvidia was on the brink of folding up. The messaging embodies the sense of frenetic desperation that continues to drive Nvidia. It is now involved in a number of partnerships for research and deployment, including many partnerships in India, notably with Tata and Reliance Groups, as well as several of the Indian Institutes of Technology.

The US has blocked the export of certain Nvidia chips to China because of possible military applications. Some of its top-end GPUs, which cost \$100,000-plus, are in such short supply that they are delivered under armed guards, and can be resold at significant premiums. The company has also been criticised by Linux developers (including Linus Torvalds) and by the gamer community for not open-sourcing drivers — the codes that run its chips. This makes it hard for developers and game designers to optimise Nvidia performance. However, Nvidia has bowed to community and peer pressure and started to open-source because its rivals Intel and AMD do so. Management theorists might cite one significant concern. Nvidia has risen to monopoly status, which is why it is valued so highly. It is such a critical component of the AI supply chain that a slight blip in its performance could derail the entire industry. Until such time as its rivals develop credible competencies, this would remain cause for worry.

## Demanding questions

All India exam protocols need a rethink

Controversies over the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test (NEET) and the University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) focus the spotlight squarely on the capabilities of the National Testing Agency (NTA) to conduct such nation-wide examinations for admission to institutes of higher education. The NTA was set up in 2017 as an autonomous institution to create a scientific exam system on a par with global standards, superseding bodies such as the All India Council of Technical Education and the Central Board of Secondary Education and colleges and institutions that conducted these exams before. It is one of the world's largest competitive testing agencies, conducting, among others, such exams as the Joint Entrance Exam for engineering colleges, the Common Management Admission Test and so on. Ironically, the NTA appears to be facing the same problems that it was set up to counter — of questionable practices in conducting exams by a myriad of institutions.

Problems have been showing up in piecemeal fashion since the NTA started functioning in 2018, such as substitute candidates appearing to write an exam (and topping it), incorrect scores, papers distributed in the wrong medium, and so on. Many of these problems converged on the current controversy over the NEET, for admission to undergraduate medical, dental, Ayush, and other courses, and the matter has reached the Supreme Court. Among the complaints were irregularities and discrepancies in the results, which were declared on June 4, the same day as the results of the Lok Sabha elections. Chief among them was the unusually high number of perfect scores, many of them reportedly from students in one centre in Haryana. Additionally, it emerged several students were granted "grace marks" for candidates facing paper-related issues, raising questions of transparency. There were also allegations of paper leaks in Bihar and Godhra (Gujarat). The Union government has since rescinded the grace marks and ordered a re-examination later this month. The latest UGC-NET, for entry-level teaching jobs and admission to PhD programmes, was cancelled by the Ministry of Education following reports from the Ministry of Home Affairs that the integrity of the exam might have been compromised. Interestingly, both allegations of paper leaks have emerged just months after Parliament passed a law to curb this India-wide menace.

The NTA's shortcomings are one aspect of the problem. But the current controversies also point to larger questions about the structure of the education system. The immediate one is whether centralising exams, involving enormous numbers spread across wide geographies, is a practical option. For instance, some 2.4 million students sat for the NEET and 900,000 for the UGC-NET in over 300 cities. The broader problem lies in the shortcomings of India's schooling system and the inadequate number of quality institutes of higher education. Students sitting for the NEET compete for 109,000 MBBS seats, for example. As a result, middle-class and lower-middle-class parents tend to invest their life savings on enrolling their children in expensive coaching classes to crack these exams. The high number of suicides by students who fail to make the cut is a direct result of these pressures. All told, the stakes for Indian students are unconscionably high. At the very least, the NTA urgently needs to address its own inefficacies so as not to add to them.

## UP's power dynamics



### BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

When the past illuminates the present, it is truly a moment of epiphany. Shyam Lal Yadav records in his book: The year was 1999 and Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government had been defeated by one vote. Elections were held in September-October and after counting was complete, the BJP's Lok Sabha seats from Uttar Pradesh (UP) had fallen to 30 out of 85. However, Vajpayee had managed to retain the parliamentary tally of his party at 182 and had taken oath again as Prime Minister, at the mercy of a complicated system of alliances.

Sound familiar? Kalyan Singh was UP chief minister (CM) at the time. Relations with Vajpayee were not cordial. So when he was summoned to Delhi for a review meeting along with Rajnath Singh, Lalji Tandon and Kalraj Mishra, he decided not to attend and went to Ayodhya instead where he criticised Vajpayee publicly for not fulfilling the Ram Mandir promise. He was stripped of the chief ministership and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leadership (that wanted to strike but not wound him for fear he might leave the party) replaced him with the venerable Ram Prakash Gupta as CM.

Kalyan Singh resigned in November, 1999. Days after that he attacked Vajpayee terming him a "conspirator, liar and a mask of the BJP". He followed this up with another charge: That for the past year, Vajpayee and other upper caste leaders had been conspiring to dethrone him from the CM's post because he belonged to the backward class. He was expelled from the BJP, formed his own party and in the 2002 Assembly elections

performed below par but damaged the BJP so much that the Samajwadi Party came to power — which he supported, becoming a minister in the Mulayam Singh-led state government, along with his son, and associate Kusum Rai.

The parallel to the political conditions today is admittedly not exact. But electoral setbacks and thwarted ambition can have an unpredictable effect on leaders.

Just saying. It is for meticulous recounting of incidents like this that this book is so valuable. The author has laid out the volume as a political history of UP's CMs beginning with G B Pant. He explains the importance of UP in national politics — not just for its centrality in the Lok Sabha but also for the role the state plays in the rise and fall of political parties. It can't have been easy to write the story, as it traverses by-lanes of history with unexpected twists and turns and a wrong turn in narration can end up in a blind alley. But Mr Yadav has pared it of all but the essential facts and has relied only on sources that can be accurately documented — such as the proceedings of the UP Legislative Assembly, authorised biographies of

CMs, published interviews, and his own reporting on the state.

Multiple terms of individual CMs have been analysed in the context of extant political conditions. For instance, Chandra Bhanu Gupta's tenure is marked by upheavals in the Congress, the problems of succession, resentment and suspicion at Nehru's plans to hand over the party's leadership to his daughter Indira Gandhi, and the rise of the Syndicate that asked CMs to decide whether they were in the tent or out of it. This theme recurs through UP's history. Even the longest-serving CMs of the state — Mulayam Singh Yadav, in office for more than six years, and Mayawati for seven — had to juggle foes in their party with the help of allies from the Opposition. It makes you wonder: How could CMs have the authority to rule and govern when they were so unsure of their tenure? Amazingly, CMs did more than just fend off challenges to their position.



The book notes Sucheta Kripalani's contribution to UP's version of the Green Revolution; Charan Singh's encouragement of Urdu as a language in state administration; Kalyan Singh, Vir Bahadur Singh and VP Singh's initiatives to curb gangs and gangsters in politics and the way the dark empire hit back when Rajnath Singh's move to end copying in examinations led to a perverse backlash, with the pass percentage in examinations dropping so precipitously

that students and parents just wanted him out! The sterling quality of this book is that it is factual. It passes no judgement on CMs except by the parameters they may have set for themselves. For instance, it notes their handling of communal riots while describing the role played by the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), possibly the only law and order force in an Indian state that has seen mutiny. The PAC's part in the killings of Muslims

used in electronics, space, and nuclear technologies. China's dominance in rare earth production provides it with significant geopolitical leverage, as seen when it restricted exports to Japan in 2010 amid a territorial dispute. The pandemic showcased another arena where technological advantage was used for geopolitical leverage through vaccine diplomacy. Additionally, control over international standard-setting bodies allows certain nations to dominate emerging technologies and block competitors' technologies from the global market.

Due to the increasing importance of geopolitical leverage through technology, discussions on technology are becoming increasingly central in international engagements, whether multilateral or bilateral. Critical topics such as cybersecurity, AI, semiconductors, electric vehicles, deep ocean exploration, space technology, biotechnology, 6G and beyond, and quantum computing are important parts of international discussions and negotiations.

What makes geopolitical leverage so crucial? It acts as a force multiplier across other dimensions. When a nation secures a trade concession by offering advanced technology, its benefit is twofold: It gains economically from the value of the technology and additionally from the trade concession. Similarly, supply of advanced military equipment helps forge strategic alliances that enhance military might as well as economic return.

While technology's influence across dimensions has not unfolded sequentially or uniformly across the four dimensions, its impact has undeniably grown over time. Today, the geopolitical leverage of technology is particularly evident. Overall, technology's influence has broadened, expanding its footprint on human existence. Moreover, history indicates that technology will continue to expand its impact, not only in known dimensions but also in new and unforeseen ways.

As Prime Minister Modi embarks on his third term, his vision to propel India to the forefront of technological advancements through strategic policy initiatives will be crucial. As the head of a coalition, he must bring his partners along on India's journey of technological advancement.

The writer is distinguished visiting professor, IIT Kanpur, and a former defence secretary

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# Agenda for regulatory reform

Improving the governance of omnipotent regulators who currently dominate the economy and the lives of Indian citizens should be at the top of the new government's priorities

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Regulation impacts our lives much more than we realise. From the coffee we have at breakfast, the e-platform-based taxi we use to go out, the e-payment we make for that journey, and our medicines and nutritional supplements — all these activities take place in regulated markets. The performance and soundness of each of these sectors is undergirded by the level of state capability of one or more regulators.

Today, there are over 20 Statutory Regulatory Authorities (SRAs) at the Union level, spanning sectors such as finance, telecommunications, electricity, water, food safety, competition, warehousing, airports, major ports, insolvency, medical professionals, dentists, nurses, auditors, and valuers, among others. Many SRAs also operate at the state level. Collectively, these directly regulate over 75 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP). The performance of these organisations, or the lack thereof, is now of strategic import for the future of the Indian development project.

In many respects, regulation has yielded good outcomes for consumers and society at large. Most regulators have been successful in maintaining a certain level of safety and quality in the goods and services that are delivered by regulated entities. However, this has not been an unmixed blessing. Alongside these triumphs, there are many problems that have arisen. The initial optimism about setting up specialised regulators has given way to concerns about their working. The concerns can be classified under the buckets of the rule of law, competition, consumer protection, and economic dynamism.

Many equate the performance of a complex organisation with the individuals at the top and thus place an emphasis on recruiting the best people as the path to performance. Recruitment decisions do matter:



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM

K P KRISHNAN

The character of the persons at the top has a substantial impact upon the skill, strategy, morale and ethics of the team. But sustained high performance by organisations cannot emerge only from bringing in the best people. Organisational performance is shaped by organisational design that creates checks and balances, which shape the incentives of the personnel (including the best people).

Regulators are very unusual public organisations in that they fuse the powers of the legislature (e.g. the parliament drafts the IPC), the executive (e.g. the role of the police and the public prosecutor), and the judiciary (the judge who writes the order). This gives them sweeping power over one sector at a time, the likes of which has not previously been witnessed in the Indian state. Regulators such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India or the Reserve Bank of India have detailed and intrusive control over their regulated entities in a manner that was not present anywhere in pre-reform India of 1991, and is not present in any advanced economy. While regulation by such bodies has helped in market development and deepening, this level of power has now begun to hamper private sector confidence, hinder innovation, and potentially hold back India's emergence as a successful economy.

Such immense power needs to go with immense care in designing checks and balances in the formal processes that must be followed at the SRA. This takes us to the organising principles of people, autonomy, process, and accountability. Such a reforms agenda will create conditions that are good for economic development and beneficial for the people.

**People:** Technical expertise and subject matter knowledge of the regulated domain are supposed to be the reasons why regulators are created. At present, the senior level people in almost all SRAs are largely former/serving government officials. In part, this is

## The rise and rise of technology

In June 2014, shortly after Prime Minister Narendra Modi commenced his first term, a pivotal meeting took place. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology was tasked with presenting its action plan for the next five years, later branded as Digital India. The presentation outlined various initiatives, including those that became popular as Jandhan, Aadhaar and Mobile (JAM), direct benefit transfer (DBT), as well as the promotion of electronics manufacturing. Towards its conclusion, a significant financial requirement was detailed to implement these initiatives. Anticipation filled the room, with many expecting concerns to be raised over the substantial funding request. Mr Modi, who attentively followed the presentation, noted that investing in technology was inherently beneficial. He asserted that the returns from these investments would significantly surpass the initial costs. The Prime Minister was arguably the first to fully grasp the transformative power of technology in a way that eluded many in the room and some of his predecessors.

Through history, technological advancement has reshaped human existence, marking distinct trends that underscore its evolving influence across four dimensions: Social progress and development, military power, economic strength, and geopolitical leverage. Initially, technological progress primarily symbolised progress and development, enhancing living standards: The discovery of fire, the advent of agriculture, and the invention of the wheel, for example. These breakthroughs marked the dawn of human progress, setting the foundation for subsequent advancements and laying the groundwork for societies.

As human societies grew and formed nation-states, the role of technology evolved beyond mere progress. It became a source of military power, with advancements used to develop superior weaponry and tools, conferring significant advantages to those who possessed them. The use of metal in weapons and armour revolutionised warfare, making armies

more powerful. During the industrial revolution, technological advancements further transformed military capabilities, shaping global power dynamics. The era of colonisation and the World Wars in the 20th century epitomised the critical role of technology in military capabilities. Nations with advanced technology, such as tanks, airplanes, and nuclear weapons, held significant power on the global stage.

Beyond the developmental and military dimensions, technological advancement also became the cornerstone of economic strength. The trend formalised through the increasing importance of intellectual property (IP) over physical assets. The rise of digital technologies accelerated this shift, with the information age giving rise to multiple trillion-dollar companies whose physical assets are only a small fraction of their economic value. The IP assets of these companies, a consequence of technological prowess, surpass the physical assets of many nations, becoming a pivotal driver of economic growth.

In the contemporary global landscape, technological advancements have transcended their initial roles of driving development, enhancing military capabilities, and boosting economic strength. Today, technology serves as a critical instrument of geopolitical leverage, shaping international relations and global power dynamics. Nations with technological supremacy wield significant influence, using their technological advantage to assert dominance and protect their strategic interests.

One prominent method of leveraging technological advancement for geopolitical gain is through trade restrictions and export controls. By limiting access to critical technologies, nations can hinder the progress of their rivals. A recent example is the US restrictions on the sale of advanced semiconductor and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies to China, aimed at curbing China's technological advancements in areas critical to national security and economic competitiveness. In retaliation, China has imposed export restrictions on rare earth elements essential for advanced materials

because the appointment process is dominated by the executive government with nominal external expert participation. The tenures of these appointees are also varying and unpredictable. The idea of a diverse group of subject matter experts with predictable and fixed long tenures to go about regulation in an essentially technical manner, with minimal political consideration at play, is still some distance away.

**Autonomy:** Operational autonomy, a distance from the department of government, is a foundational argument for SRAs. We need to harmonise different legislative provisions to empower all SRAs to make regulations without government approval. This domain autonomy, in turn, requires a degree of human resource and financial autonomy. But these legislative provisions need to combine resource autonomy with checks-and-balances to protect against mission creep, self-aggrandisement and other abuses.

**Process:** The regulations written by regulators are law. In democratic societies, the power to make laws is with elected bodies that are formally accountable to the people. One would therefore expect elaborate safeguards on the exercise of this power when it is delegated to non-elected bodies. Most Indian statutes do not write down the processes through which regulators will exercise this power. There is thus a "democratic and legitimacy deficit" in regulation-making, where the task of writing laws has shifted from the hands of the elected representatives of the people to the hands of unelected officials. Similarly, formal processes need to be written down by the legislature on how the executive and judicial functions of regulators should be carried out.

**Accountability:** All public agencies have to be accountable for their operations and outcomes through the parliament to the people. This is a standard principle of constitutional democracies. The primary accountability designed in most Indian SRA statutes is a parliamentary oversight of the working of these authorities, secured through open discussions on the annual performance and financial report of the SRA. This sort of discussion has not happened even once in the Indian Parliament for any SRA. Accountability requires three reforms: A correctly structured board with clarity of functions and role, appeals at a tribunal, and audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

Over a decade ago, a comprehensive report on the reform of SRAs was written in the context of financial sector SRAs by the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission. Headed by a former Supreme Court judge with subject matter experts drawn from different backgrounds, the Commission presented a detailed report on sector-agnostic governance reforms for all SRAs in India. It is time to take this report out of the proverbial closet, update it to meet current-day needs, and swiftly act upon its recommendations.

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





OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Restore credibility  
of national tests

Government must step in and assure students of corrective steps, including foolproof exams

Even as questions swirled about the efficacy of this year’s National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for medical education, the Centre cancelled the University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) a day after it was conducted, saying that the “integrity” of the process may have been compromised. A little over 900,000 aspirants will have to take the test again, while the NEET imbroglio has left around 2.4 million aspirants in a flux even as counselling is set to begin. Central to both episodes is the competence of the National Testing Agency (NTA) which conducts both the tests, and, as a corollary, the impact on aspirants’ trust in a clean, fair testing process. The government needs to act quickly to restore this trust, given national entrance exams remain a key ladder for millions of students to ensure a decent future for themselves and their families, and therefore, carry enormous burdens of aspiration. As exams that select the country’s future doctors and professors, they also remain key to shaping the country’s future.

Unfortunately, that trust has now been sullied. Despite the government’s assurances, questions linger about the processes followed by NTA and the safeguards built into the system. This calls for transparent investigations and a public acknowledgement of the missteps. NTA and other stakeholders can then attempt to fix the gaps. Beyond this, there is a need to make the testing framework foolproof to leaks and other malpractice. To start with, effort should be made to ensure that the paper-and-pen format involving physical question papers and OMR sheets yields to computer-based tests (CBTs), as is the global practice. This takes care of question paper leaks from printing presses and test centres.

Coupled with measures such as real-time tracking and limited connection time with the internet — to address the vulnerabilities of CBTs — this can also minimise chances of manipulation or subversion of the testing process. At the same time, shifting to multiple-choice questions that test a deep conceptual understanding of a subject can also negate subjectivity that is typical of manual assessment, at least at the preliminary level of screening. Then there are secondary ways in which the eroded trust can be repaired — from greater sharing of anonymised performance data, detailed analyses of scoring, and using technology and psychometric analysis to reduce cheating.

The government and NTA must also engage with this year’s aspirants, ensure that the disruption to their careers is minimal, and be as open in fixing lacunae as possible. The imperative to do this quickly cannot be overstated. At stake is the future of India’s young people, and what can be more important than that?

Yoga isn’t just a lifestyle  
choice, it is soft power

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is participating in the International Yoga celebrations in Srinagar today. Last year, he led a public session at the United Nations headquarters in New York with participants from 180 countries joining him. Since he mooted the idea of a day to mark this ancient Indian practice that has in its core the idea of a holistic wellness of the body and mind at his address to the UN General Assembly in 2014, Yoga has found a new wind as a collective global action, and as a lifestyle choice: This year, the motto is Yoga for Self and Society.

Since 2015, when the UN proclaimed June 21 as International Yoga Day, the already-popular practice has found more followers in multiple countries. As for Delhi, the global acceptance of Yoga marks its soft power influence, useful as the country seeks to discover a greater and more influential role in global affairs. In fact, soft power was also New Delhi’s calling card in international affairs when the newly independent nation, emerging from colonial exploitation, sought to engage with the world on its terms. Classical music, dance, textiles, craft that barely survived the onslaught of colonialism, and popular cinema, the outcome of a Western cultural idiom engaging with the indigenous theatre traditions, won India friends in its extended neighbourhood and beyond.

The US had mastered this art and American soft power played an influential role in Washington winning the Cold War. Today, Korean soft power through K-Pop and K-Drama has created a new global paradigm for the country. The championing of Yoga, in a similar vein, underlines the value of soft power in embellishing India’s position as a “friend of the world”.

Transform MSMEs to  
address the jobs gap

Better access to finance can boost growth and unlock the true potential of the sector, a key employment provider

India’s 65 million MSMEs employ around 25% of the country’s workforce. This sector is a vital job creator and crucial to the health of the economy. However, for micro-enterprises to grow to small enterprises and then medium enterprises and beyond, the cost is almost prohibitive. One of the key factors that is crushing the growth prospects of MSMEs is access to finance.

Delayed payments remain a major impediment to the potential and growth of MSMEs. Unfortunately, this issue has become too normalised, driven by lack of concern by large organisations that engage these MSMEs as contracted partners. Delayed payments to MSMEs leave them severely malnourished, as their revenue from contracts gets deferred by months and sometimes even years.

Large corporations routinely rely on MSMEs to supply components, intermediates and services of a pre-defined quality, as it can be cheaper to buy from a third party rather than to invest working capital and build capacity in-house. Credit periods or

terms are generally stipulated by the buyer. MSMEs, due to their size and lack of negotiation power, get stuck when it comes to realising payments. The amount of working capital to be invested by MSMEs becomes disproportionate to the size of their operations. This significantly stunts their growth.

Challenges in receiving payments from large corporations hamper the growth potential of MSMEs who do not have the capital they need to further expand their operations. This is not only bad for these small enterprises but also if the MSME sector weakens, it will directly affect the Indian economy.

According to the Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship’s (GAME) Delayed Payments 2.0 report, a massive amount of ₹10.7 lakh crore in payments was due to MSMEs in 2021. This amounts to 7.8% of India’s GDP. With the growth in the economy since then, this number would have gone up further today.

While the government has been proactively addressing the challenges of delayed payments to MSMEs, there have been steady and consistent measures taken to track, monitor and address this issue. The Samadhaan portal was launched in 2017 to monitor the outstanding dues to MSMEs. State governments have also set up mechanisms to resolve

disputes. However, in many cases, MSMEs have to approach the courts for the execution of the decisions of the council.

In 2023, India’s finance ministry added 43B(h) to the Income Tax Act, 1961. Intending to effectively tackle delayed payment issues, this amendment penalises companies that have not cleared dues to MSMEs within a maximum of 45 days from the delivery date of goods and services. “45-day-rule” as it is commonly referred to has seen some resistance from certain sections of MSMEs. They see this legislation as hinder-

ing their ability to do business, taking a short-term view that the companies that use them as vendors would be negatively affected.

Organisations such as the Federation of Indian Micro and Small and Medium Enterprises (FISME) have found that the fear that the 45-day rule hampers business is unwarranted. This amendment simply requires that MSMEs receive payments within 15 days without any agreement and within 45 days with agreement. This provision gets triggered on a company’s balance sheet date at the end of the financial year, i.e. March 31. Only those invoices that are pending payment on that day are covered. Transactions made during the rest of the year are not affected by the



Ravi Venkatesan



The ripple effect of prompt payments can lead to a movement of mass entrepreneurship, which in turn will lead to further job-creation and the strengthening of our country’s economy

BLOOMBERG

amendment. In the case that the company does not make the payment to the MSME in March, they would have to make the Income Tax payment as applicable. Even in that case, once they pay the MSME in the following year, they could claim a refund. This gives both large corporations as well as MSMEs enough leeway to work in a way that is favourable to both parties.

Unfortunately, large corporations see delayed payments to MSMEs as the latter’s cost of doing business. The prospect of future contracts is used as leverage with aggrieved MSMEs, an almost coercive tactic. While legislation is a work in progress, what cannot be legislated is good behaviour by corporations. What is needed is a shift in corpo-

rate values where MSMEs are treated fairly. Good governance in large corporations must include prompt payments to vendors and partners.

Realising receivables at the right time can enable MSMEs to thrive, expand their operations and in fact, have a better quality of output, leading to the betterment of the sector as a whole. The ripple effect of prompt payments can lead to a movement of mass entrepreneurship, which in turn will lead to further job-creation and the strengthening of our country’s economy.

Ravi Venkatesan is founder, Global Alliance for Mass Entrepreneurship (GAME). The views expressed are personal

Building India-US ties  
with shared priorities

What a triumph for all Indians the general elections have been. This vote was a giant point of pride for democracy-loving people everywhere, especially in these turbulent geopolitical times. The polls will stand as a testament to the democratic spirit of the Indian people, whose voices have been heard from the furthest villages in the Himalayas to the giant cities of the plains to the hamlets in the Nicobar Islands. As the world’s two largest democracies, the free-spirited people of India and the US foster a deepening trust and mutual admiration, inspiring optimism about the promising future of India and its relations with America and the world.

Embracing the philosophy of “kaizen” (constant improvement) from Japan, a Quad partner, there are several areas where the collective efforts of India and the US can be intensified to continue growth and achievements.

First, India’s appeal as a destination for foreign investment that yields know-how, jobs, and vital tax revenue can be significantly boosted by simplifying regulatory requirements and improving market access. Expanding US-India bilateral trade to \$500 billion remains a crucial benchmark for success. Reducing friction in the flow of capital will help attract trillions of available American investment dollars that are seeking safe harbours. A formal Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) is an example of how the two countries can operationalise trusted supply chains, further bolstering the collective endeavour to build a resilient and secure global tech business ecosystem free from malign interference. This framework, supported by other like-minded countries, promotes economic growth, innovation, and a favourable business environment while safeguarding against geopolitical risks. Simplifying tax codes will further boost investor confidence and draw much-needed FDI.

Second, India and the US should broaden the scope of their digital partnership while enhancing the protection of intellectual property rights. These nations lead the world in digital innovation and must remain leaders in this new frontier of geopolitical competition. The United States-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (iCET), which USIBC helped launch, and the achievements in areas ranging from aerospace to semiconductors show the promise of what can be achieved together. Expanding the iCET framework and institutionalising US-Indian digital cooperation in a digital roadmap could unleash the incredible collaborative economic and social potential in areas like 5G deployment, data privacy, generative AI, and cybersecurity cooperation. Artificial intelligence (AI), especially as India

has chaired the Global Partnership on AI, remains a particularly fruitful area.

Third, India is well-positioned to be a global leader in renewable energy shaping the direction of the current green power revolution. From green hydrogen to electric vehicles, India is already a strong clean energy leader with significant potential for further leadership. Critical mineral supply chains, especially refining and recycling, remain a priority area for both the US and India. The private-public partnerships and the vibrant green energy sector are eager to work more with the new Indian government to support environmental, anti-pollution, and commercial targets. Initiatives such as establishing innovation hubs and centres of excellence in emerging fields such as AI, biotechnology, and clean energy can significantly boost India’s innovation landscape and help reduce reliance on hydrocarbons.

Fourth, the current momentum in the defence technology and security relationship should be expanded. This includes reaffirming the iCET and INDUS-X initiatives and considering practical expansions to encompass secure fibre, biotechnology, and more. Quad efforts could be amplified by inviting South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore to coordinate their efforts, while the co-development of defence technologies, such as UAVs and cybersecurity solutions, will bolster defence capabilities and foster innovation. Joint naval patrols in the Indo-Pacific can ensure maritime security and stability.

Moreover, with a burgeoning commercial space sector, there is ample opportunity for collaborative innovation between the two countries. NASA is poised to offer advanced training to Indian astronauts, and the planned launch of the NISAR satellite from Isro’s Satish Dhawan Space Centre marks a significant step. As India liberalises its space and satcom sector, tremendous synergies in critical technology development, access to American capital and expertise, and entry into a sizable space and satcom marketplace can be realised.

Finally, it is most important to facilitate the ease of doing business and reinforce confidence within the global investment community as India stakes its claim in uncertain times. Actions like simplifying regulations, reducing duplicative paperwork and reporting requirements, and expanding mechanisms to cut red tape are all welcome. Furthermore, enhancing foreign direct investment (FDI) flows by levelling the playing field and reducing capital flow friction will spur economic growth and attract more international businesses to India.

Amid the complexities of the global landscape, the US-India partnership remains a beacon of hope and progress for all of humanity, including those who can only dream of democratic freedoms. The potential for growth in the bilateral relationship is immense. The path ahead is bright, and with unwavering commitment and collaboration, the US-India partnership will continue to flourish, setting a remarkable example of what two great democracies can achieve together. Free elections are the jet fuel that powers the relationship to new heights of happiness and prosperity.



Atul Keshap

INDIA IS WELL-POSITIONED TO BE A GLOBAL LEADER IN RENEWABLE ENERGY. FROM GREEN HYDROGEN TO ELECTRIC VEHICLES, INDIA IS ALREADY A STRONG CLEAN ENERGY LEADER WITH SIGNIFICANT POTENTIAL FOR FURTHER LEADERSHIP

Atul Keshap, a retired American diplomat, is president, US-India Business Council and senior vice president, South Asia, US Chamber of Commerce. The views expressed are personal

{ S JAISHANKAR } EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MINISTER



Under the Sri Lankan President’s guidance, we discussed the way forward for India-Sri Lanka cooperation, especially in power, energy, port infrastructure... We are committed to working for the steady development of our traditionally close and friendly ties



The barefoot historian who  
saw Kolkata from its streets

Historians use different constructs to retell history’s many platitudes: Nowhere in the world has one particular “history” ruled absolute. The same can be said about Calcutta (now Kolkata) too, as recorded by the self-trained historian, P Thankappan Nair, who published over 60 volumes on the different aspects of the city’s history. With Nair’s passing on June 18, at the age of 91, an era ended.

Born in 1933 in Manjapa, a village in Kerala, Nair arrived in Calcutta in 1955 after completing his matriculation. The city was still to shed the colonial hues. It was also teeming with post-Partition refugees. It was not easy for an outsider like Nair to get a hang of the city. After graduation, while working as a typist, Nair became an amateur historian of the city. Equally, his life as a flaneur took him to the inner hearts of Bengal, to the riversides, dense forests and to the tangled populated spaces.

His job as a typist in a city journal introduced him to a lot of regulars in many publications at that time. All of them had different stories about Calcutta and its many inner lives. This prompted Nair to delve deep into the history of Bengal. He read for long hours at the city’s public libraries. “He is sent from Kerala to Bengal to narrate our lives more than what we know,” popular singer Suchitra Mitra once said about Nair.

His reading was not just limited to history. His training in anthropology helped him to view and construct anthro-social histories of the people around him. For him, history meant people, not rulers and pundits. He defied the historical methods of colonial historiographers and those trained by them. In some sense, it won’t be out of context to claim that Nair was one of the foremost material cultural historians of India.

Of his many remarkable books, *British Beginnings in Bengal 1600-1660* and *A History of Calcutta’s Streets* stand apart due to their intense scholarship and archival acumen. Calcutta’s streets, familiar and unfamiliar, turn out to be veritable jewels of information in the latter book. Nair observes with the verve of Walter Benjamin; he does not leave a street, a shop or a brothel. When one walks in the suburbs, one really understands the city, its “subterranean” spaces where people are condemned to live like rats, the fringes where refugees and other marginalised sections struggle to make a living.

I was taken to his house by friends while

I was in the city for an academic lecture. He lived amidst piles of papers, books, ledgers and other things that were arranged in an order that only he could figure. Books sat on his bed and on the ridge of the big windows, and writing material sprawled on the unwashed floors. He asked me about my talk. When I mentioned how history is subverted, he turned serious and asked: “Wasn’t it always like that, for the benefit of a few?”

Nair did not lead a cosy life as a historian. In the late 1990s, he was seeking support for his various forms of research. He requested Jyoti Basu, the then chief minister of Bengal, to provide him with a monthly stipend of ₹3,000, which the government declined. However, his indomitable willpower did not deter him. As a tireless researcher and

writer, he kept working. He wrote about the history of the National Library in Kolkata and later, BS Kesavan, the national librarian.

Nair’s personal tragedies were immense. Yet he withstood all of that, including the untimely death of his son. For him, the public was everything; the private was a space where one constructs the future. He declined to sell his collection of books, paper, and other materials. He reportedly declined an offer from a foreign library to buy his books for a large sum; he preferred to donate them to the Kolkata Town Hall Society.

Nair relocated to Chendamangalam, Kerala in 2018, the native place of his partner, Seethadevi, who is also a poet. On the day of leaving Calcutta, many wondered, how could he have said adieu to the beloved streets, the people, and the cultural ethos. After the packing was done, Seetha told the media. “Even today, at this moment also, he doesn’t want to leave Calcutta.”

What will be the legacy of Nair? As a writer who employed many methods to construct the history of the common man? He defied all established canons and power centres and his work will, surely, be appreciated for not reflecting the structures of hegemony. He will be remembered by all those who consult his tremendous body of work, of course, and by those who knew him well as a common man walking the streets of Kolkata.

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Krishnan Unni P



OUR VIEW



# Euro 2024: Boardrooms must tune into football

The Euro 2024 football competition holds lessons for companies on team creation and goal orientation. Hint: Look at the age profile of key players and diversity of Europe's top teams

The market for HR professionals is teeming with trainers, coaches, life hack experts and motivational gurus. Companies are keen to imbue employees with diverse skills, both hard and soft. Among the capabilities that businesses want their staff to acquire, a particularly hard-fought one is team spirit. Crucial as teams are for enhancing productivity, or accelerating learning, they also play a pivotal role in achieving other corporate aims, like better communication and coordination, crunched delivery timelines and reduced errors. Companies often engage external experts to conduct team-building workshops who then deploy a various exercises to test and expand people's capacity for problem-solving. Trainers borrow heavily from a variety of real-life sources to enliven these sessions. This summer, managers and trainers would do well to observe the Euro 2024 football tournament being played in Germany for some key lessons in team creation and goal orientation.

Euro 2024 showcases, even if involuntarily, the willingness of national football associations to shed stale ideas on eligibility. One of the most amazing aspects of it is their inclination to discard the illogical practice of ageism. The competition highlights how various national teams are relying on a clutch of ageing players who, through their skills and gameplay, defy the notion that age can be a handicap. Defender Pepe, for example, is a regular in Portugal's team, even though he turned 41 a few months ago, an age considered fit for retirement not only from national teams, but also from club football. His compatriot Cristiano Ronaldo, aged over 39, is not only supremely athletic and in possession of a fantastic footballing brain, but

also acts as a source of inspiration for younger players. Croatia has Luka Modric, also 39, who helped Real Madrid win this year's Champions League. Corporate boardrooms also need to appreciate how age can encapsulate multiple facets needed for better performance: institutional memory, an ability to deal with crises and the experience of having withstood the vicissitudes of varied business cycles.

There is another aspect of international football—and Euro 2024 in particular—that should guide corporate recruitment for leadership teams, especially those swearing allegiance to the credo of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). The teams of Europe's top footballing countries today look very different from their earlier configurations. Germany has selected Ilkay Gündoğan, son of Turkish migrants, to lead its quest for the Euro 2024 trophy. France has the gifted winger Kylian Mbappé, a first-generation French national born to Algerian and Cameroonian immigrants, as its captain. Selectors have gone a step ahead and even appointed foreigners as team coaches: Albania has Sylvinho, a Spaniard, while Hungary hired Marco Rossi, an Italian. The idea is simple: Get the best professionals for the job, nationality and other factors be damned. Predictably, voices of resistance have arisen within Europe's growing right-wing politics. Some have even suggested that a referendum be held to determine who should play for the national team, mindless of the irony of hard nationalism within soft European borders. In the end, DEI should be put into practice and not remain just a buzzword, like how infotech firms seem to reflexively use the term "scrum" for meetings with little appreciation for why it was borrowed from rugby in the first place.

DHIRAJ NIM



is an economist at ANZ Research.

India's inflation data has shown two 'divides' in recent times. The gap between food and core inflation has got most attention. The unanimous opinion is that adequate rain will support agricultural output and cool food inflation, paving the way for rate cuts by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The most puzzling divide, however, is India's widening rural-urban inflation gap. Consumer price index (CPI) data for May confirmed that high rural inflation is keeping the 4% inflation target elusive. At 4.2% in May, urban inflation was relatively benign, but the rural-urban gap has widened to an average 1.3 percentage points in the last three months. Why is rural inflation high when rural demand is weak?

High rural inflation has deeper roots. The component-wise CPI details show that 'fuel and light' can explain a large part of the rural-urban inflation gap. Rural 'fuel and light' inflation has averaged 7.5 percentage points above urban inflation in the last three months. In fact, if it matched the urban print,

overall inflation would be lower by 30-40 basis points in May, falling below 4.5%.

A difference in energy consumption patterns between rural and urban households holds the key. While urban households depend on electricity and liquified petroleum gas (LPG), the rural energy basket is quite diversified, including unregulated, locally available and low-calorific value fuels such as coal, coke, charcoal, firewood and dung cakes. Inflation has been quite stubborn for these unregulated items.

According to the National Sample Survey, in 2020-21, less than half of all rural households had access to LPG, compared to over 90% in urban areas. Rural LPG penetration has increased since 2021, but it has not translated into a strong rise in LPG consumption. As gas prices shot up on the back of the global energy price shock in 2022, LPG consumption growth weakened in India, reflecting the price sensitivity of demand.

In response to a Right-to-Information query in August 2023, India's government stated that one in four beneficiaries of the PM Ujjwala Yojana (a scheme for providing clean cooking fuel to rural and poor households) either did not buy any LPG cylinder or took just one refill. Households can take a maximum of 12 refills a year, but that limit

is rarely exhausted by rural households. This is despite two LPG price cuts by the government: ₹200 per cylinder in August 2023 and ₹100 in March 2024. Despite the cuts, it is likely the LPG price shock induced by the global energy price rise in 2022 made it unaffordable for rural households. This led them to partially revert to cheaper locally available fuels, driving up their prices on the back of surging substitution demand. So, while the LPG price cuts helped lower urban 'fuel and light' inflation materially, their impact on rural energy inflation has been underwhelming.

The rural-urban inflation gap is also wide for other retail items such as vegetables, recreation and cereals. A probable reason could be an expanded rural consumer base that is burdening supply chains. It is likely that the large-scale urban-to-rural migration that took place during the pandemic has not reversed yet. The media has intermittently reported increased

labour supply at farms in the pandemic's aftermath, accompanied by a persistent shortage of unskilled labour in urban centres. There has been anecdotal evidence of rural labour being reluctant to relocate to cities on account of lower opportunity costs than before.

There could be several reasons for this. For instance, a slow recovery in low-end manufacturing. Industrial production data show that sectors such as textiles, garments, tobacco and leather have not yet reclaimed their pre-pandemic output levels, which typically form about 15% of manufacturing. These sectors together employ about one-third of India's industrial workforce, which has had a large number of migrants.

Other reasons include rising housing costs in cities and the government's free-food scheme for the poor in rural areas, which has eased the burden on rural household budgets and reduced the incentive to seek higher 'city wages.'

Although rural-urban migration trends are captured by the population census that takes place once every 10 years, there are other indicators that can offer a picture. For instance, the post-pandemic recovery in railway journeys has been lacklustre. As of September 2023, monthly journeys were lower by almost 100 million from the 700 million pre-pandemic level. For the year ended 31 March 2024, the number of railway journeys was 20% lower than the pre-covid count. However, the Indian Railways recorded a healthy revenue growth of 7%, reflecting a crowding out of low-value ticket journeys, as tariffs for upper-class railway travel have been hiked. This seems like one among other markers of a weakened steady-state migration dynamic for now.

A persistent post-pandemic contraction in inflation-adjusted rural wage growth also supports the 'surplus labour' argument.

High rural inflation beyond the influence of RBI is impeding price stability in India. Balancing a hawkish stance with financial conditions, so that monetary policy does not overly tighten and hurt economic growth, will become increasingly important. For that, liquidity management will remain RBI's playground. On policy rates of interest, patience will need to be exercised.

MY VIEW | TECH WHISPERS

# India should look towards Japan for an AI regulation framework

The Japanese approach aims for balanced AI development and could suit our societal orientation



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G7 summit, where the Hiroshima AI process gave a clarion call for exploring various frameworks to regulate AI. It was no coincidence that the summit was in Hiroshima, with its stark reminder on what could happen if technology is misused. Two basic approaches emerged: a 'hard law-based' approach with strict obligations, as evidenced by the EU's AI Act and Chinese regulation, and a 'soft law-based' one, which emphasizes non-binding guidance and principles. Japan leans towards the latter.

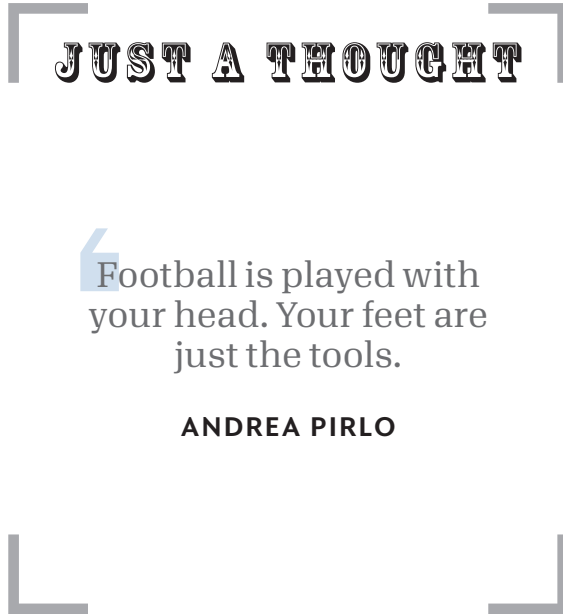
Inge Odendaal of Stellenbosch University describes the principles very well in her paper ([bit.ly/3Vohg1t](https://bit.ly/3Vohg1t)):

The government acts as a facilitator: AI is a complex ecosystem of technologies, and the Japanese government prefers to be a facilitator rather than sole creator of innovation. It acknowledges the private sector as the primary driver and activates its governance institutions to help them. Japan's foreign affairs ministry coordinated the Hiroshima process, for example, and its cultural affairs ministry is looking at copyright issues. This is a perfect template for India to adopt. The government should place the private technology sector at the centre of Indian efforts, with enabling roles to be played by its ministries of electronics and information technology, law, and information and broadcasting.

QUICK READ

The Japanese model of regulating AI places the tech industry at the centre, with the government acting an enabler and Generative AI treated as a public good that can serve collective interests.

The Eastern idea of collective privacy, which differs from the Western notion of individual privacy, is another reason why India may be served well by a 'look east' stance on AI rules.



GUEST VIEW

# Rural-urban inflation gap: Can this puzzle be solved?

DHIRAJ NIM



is an economist at ANZ Research.

India's inflation data has shown two 'divides' in recent times. The gap between food and core inflation has got most attention. The unanimous opinion is that adequate rain will support agricultural output and cool food inflation, paving the way for rate cuts by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The most puzzling divide, however, is India's widening rural-urban inflation gap. Consumer price index (CPI) data for May confirmed that high rural inflation is keeping the 4% inflation target elusive. At 4.2% in May, urban inflation was relatively benign, but the rural-urban gap has widened to an average 1.3 percentage points in the last three months. Why is rural inflation high when rural demand is weak?

High rural inflation has deeper roots. The component-wise CPI details show that 'fuel and light' can explain a large part of the rural-urban inflation gap. Rural 'fuel and light' inflation has averaged 7.5 percentage points above urban inflation in the last three months. In fact, if it matched the urban print,

overall inflation would be lower by 30-40 basis points in May, falling below 4.5%.

A difference in energy consumption patterns between rural and urban households holds the key. While urban households depend on electricity and liquified petroleum gas (LPG), the rural energy basket is quite diversified, including unregulated, locally available and low-calorific value fuels such as coal, coke, charcoal, firewood and dung cakes. Inflation has been quite stubborn for these unregulated items.

According to the National Sample Survey, in 2020-21, less than half of all rural households had access to LPG, compared to over 90% in urban areas. Rural LPG penetration has increased since 2021, but it has not translated into a strong rise in LPG consumption. As gas prices shot up on the back of the global energy price shock in 2022, LPG consumption growth weakened in India, reflecting the price sensitivity of demand.

In response to a Right-to-Information query in August 2023, India's government stated that one in four beneficiaries of the PM Ujjwala Yojana (a scheme for providing clean cooking fuel to rural and poor households) either did not buy any LPG cylinder or took just one refill. Households can take a maximum of 12 refills a year, but that limit

is rarely exhausted by rural households. This is despite two LPG price cuts by the government: ₹200 per cylinder in August 2023 and ₹100 in March 2024. Despite the cuts, it is likely the LPG price shock induced by the global energy price rise in 2022 made it unaffordable for rural households. This led them to partially revert to cheaper locally available fuels, driving up their prices on the back of surging substitution demand. So, while the LPG price cuts helped lower urban 'fuel and light' inflation materially, their impact on rural energy inflation has been underwhelming.

The rural-urban inflation gap is also wide for other retail items such as vegetables, recreation and cereals. A probable reason could be an expanded rural consumer base that is burdening supply chains. It is likely that the large-scale urban-to-rural migration that took place during the pandemic has not reversed yet. The media has intermittently reported increased

labour supply at farms in the pandemic's aftermath, accompanied by a persistent shortage of unskilled labour in urban centres. There has been anecdotal evidence of rural labour being reluctant to relocate to cities on account of lower opportunity costs than before.

There could be several reasons for this. For instance, a slow recovery in low-end manufacturing. Industrial production data show that sectors such as textiles, garments, tobacco and leather have not yet reclaimed their pre-pandemic output levels, which typically form about 15% of manufacturing. These sectors together employ about one-third of India's industrial workforce, which has had a large number of migrants.

Other reasons include rising housing costs in cities and the government's free-food scheme for the poor in rural areas, which has eased the burden on rural household budgets and reduced the incentive to seek higher 'city wages.'

Although rural-urban migration trends are captured by the population census that takes place once every 10 years, there are other indicators that can offer a picture. For instance, the post-pandemic recovery in railway journeys has been lacklustre. As of September 2023, monthly journeys were lower by almost 100 million from the 700 million pre-pandemic level. For the year ended 31 March 2024, the number of railway journeys was 20% lower than the pre-covid count. However, the Indian Railways recorded a healthy revenue growth of 7%, reflecting a crowding out of low-value ticket journeys, as tariffs for upper-class railway travel have been hiked. This seems like one among other markers of a weakened steady-state migration dynamic for now.

A persistent post-pandemic contraction in inflation-adjusted rural wage growth also supports the 'surplus labour' argument.

High rural inflation beyond the influence of RBI is impeding price stability in India. Balancing a hawkish stance with financial conditions, so that monetary policy does not overly tighten and hurt economic growth, will become increasingly important. For that, liquidity management will remain RBI's playground. On policy rates of interest, patience will need to be exercised.









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# What is UGC-NET, exam to qualify for a univ teacher’s job?

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND  
NEW DELHI, JUNE 20

THE UNIVERSITY Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) was cancelled by the Ministry of Education late on Wednesday, just a day after it was held. In a statement, the Ministry said that it received inputs from the National Cybercrime Threat Analytics Unit of the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre indicating that the integrity of the examination may have been compromised.

The cancellation has hit more than 9 lakh candidates who sat for the exam this year, and has prompted protests by student organisations. Candidates will now have to take the examination all over again.

The fiasco follows the NEET-UG controversy over alleged paper leaks and the decision to hold a re-test for 1,563 candidates

who were given 'grace marks.'

**What is the UGC-NET, and who takes it?**  
The UGC-NET is a test conducted twice a year, in June and in December, by the National Testing Agency (NTA). The NTA also conducts public examinations like the JEE (Main), the NEET-UG, and the CUET for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The NTA has been conducting UGC-NET from December 2018 onwards. Prior to this, the exam was conducted by the CBSE.  
As a test, the purpose of the UGC-NET is three-fold. Since 1989, the UGC-NET has been used to determine the eligibility of candidates for the post of assistant professor, the junior-most teaching position in universities. According to UGC rules, clearing the UGC-NET is the minimum eligibility criteria for the post of assistant professor even in private universities.

Since 1984, the UGC-NET has been used as the primary criteria for granting the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF), which provides monetary assistance to those undertaking advanced studies and research leading to MPhil/PhD Degrees in humanities and social sciences including languages and sciences.

This academic session onwards, UGC-NET scores can also be used for PhD admissions. Earlier, these admissions were most often carried out based on universities' and institutes' own entrance exams. Under the new system, admissions to PhD programmes are based on both the NET score and marks obtained in an interview.

**What is the structure of the exam and who is eligible to take it?**  
The three-hour long examination com-

prises two papers with multiple choice questions, and no negative marking.

Paper I, of 100 marks, is a general paper meant to assess teaching and research aptitude. Paper II, of 200 marks, is subject-specific. Candidates usually select the subject of their post-graduation. A total of 83 subjects are offered, including languages, history, law, anthropology, music, philosophy, political science, geography, and comparative literature. Paper II is meant to assess candidates' proficiency in their given subject.  
From December 2018 onward, the NTA had been conducting the UGC-NET as a computer-based test. This was changed this year, when the test was a pen-and-paper one, using an OMR sheet.  
The computer-based test was held over multiple days and in multiple shifts, depend-

ing on the availability of centres. For instance, when UGC-NET was held in December last year, it was conducted over eight days, in 15 shifts. In contrast, the pen and paper test was held on a single day, June 18, in two shifts – from 9.30 am to 12.30 pm, and 3 pm to 6 pm.  
Candidates in the General category have to secure at least 55% marks in their Master's degree examinations to be able to appear for the UGC-NET. SC, ST, OBC, and persons with disability candidates need to secure 50% in their Master's degree examinations.  
Earlier this year, the UGC had said that candidates who have cleared a four-year undergraduate degree programme may also sit for the NET, if they have a minimum of 75% marks.  
There is no age limit to sit for the UGC-NET for assistant professor posts and PhD admissions. However, for the JRF, there is an age limit of 30 years as of June 1.

**How many people take the exam? How many qualify?**  
This year, around 9,08,580 candidates appeared for this exam at 1,205 centres across 317 cities, nearly twice the 4,62,144 who appeared for the exam in June last year, across 181 cities. In December last year, 6,95,928 candidates appeared in 292 cities.  
A fraction of those who appear are successful. Last June, 32,304 candidates qualified for the post of assistant professor, while 4,937 candidates qualified for the JRF, in addition to being eligible for an assistant professor post.  
Cut-off marks are declared subject- and category-wise for the post of assistant professor, and for the JRF. The number of candidates who qualify for eligibility to the post of assistant professor shall be 6% of the candidates who appeared for both papers, according to the NTA's information bulletin on UGC-NET June 2024.

## THIS WORD MEANS

### HOOCH

The name for cheap, homespun alcohol is derived from Hoochinoo, an Alaska tribe known for its potent liquor

AT LEAST 38 people have died, and around 100 others are hospitalised after consuming hooch in Tamil Nadu's Kallakurichi.



A typical setup to produce hooch. Wikimedia Commons

#### What is hooch?

Unlike branded liquor which is produced in factories with sophisticated equipment and rigorous quality control, hooch is made in more crude settings. It may be disagreeable to one's taste buds, and is simply meant to intoxicate. But when prepared improperly, it can kill.

#### How is hooch made?

All alcohol is produced using two basic processes: fermentation and distillation.  
**FERMENTATION:** When heated, yeast reacts with sugar (from grain, fruits, sugarcane, etc.) to produce alcohol in a process called fermentation. Beverages like beer and wine are made using this process. But there is a basic limitation. The alcohol produced is toxic to the yeast. Thus, fermentation stops when the mixture is roughly 15% alcohol by volume.  
**DISTILLATION:** This process physically separates alcohol from the fermented mixture by taking advantage of the differing boiling points of the mixture's various constituents. Distilled beverages, or spirits, are far more potent than fermented beverages.  
Hooch is produced by distilling a fermented mixture, generally of locally available yeast, and sugar or fruit (often fruit waste). Most often, multiple rounds of distillation are carried out to produce more potent alcohol.

#### Why can hooch be dangerous?

Hooch producers use a very rudimentary distilling setup, often just a big vat to boil the mixture, a pipe that captures and carries the alcoholic fumes, and another pot where concentrated alcohol condenses. There is no temperature control mechanism, unlike in alcohol factories.  
This comes with an inherent risk. Fermentation does not only produce consumable alcohol (ethanol). It also produces methanol, an industrial alcohol that is highly toxic for human beings. Distillation helps concentrate both ethanol and methanol.

Methanol has a boiling point of 64.7 degrees Celsius, lower than that of ethanol (78.37 degrees Celsius). This means that during distillation, methanol is first collected, which must be discarded. Only alcohol collected after the mixture reaches 78.37 degrees Celsius should eventually be consumed. At the same time, distillers need to also keep the temperature of the mixture under 100 degrees Celsius, or the boiling point of water, above which they will produce a very watered-down product.  
There is no way hooch-makers can carry out this process with the degree of accuracy needed to make it safe. In fact, they often err on the side of caution (keep temperatures high), and then resort to adulteration to make their product potent. Adulterants such as organic waste and battery acid, however, are themselves very dangerous. They make hooch more intoxicating, and can also be deadly if present in high enough concentrations.

#### How does hooch impact the body?

Methanol can cause impaired vision, high toxicity, and metabolic acidosis, a condition in which the body produces excessive acid that cannot be flushed out by the kidneys.  
The treatment for this is to intravenously administer fomepizole. However, fomepizole can be expensive and is unavailable in many parts of India. In such cases, doctors administer a mixture of ethanol and water (1:1 ratio). Ethanol inhibits methanol's conversion into toxins and helps in flushing it out of the body either naturally, or through dialysis.

ARJUN SENGUPTA



SHUBHAJIT ROY

IT IS four years this week since the Galwan clashes of June 15, 2020 that rocked India-China ties, and the border standoff is yet to be resolved. About 50,000 to 60,000 troops are still deployed on each side of the border. Managing the relationship with China is the most pressing challenge for the Narendra Modi government in its third term.  
The Prime Minister is likely to be in the same place at the same time as China's President Xi Jinping during the leaders' summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, on July 3-4. It remains to be seen if a meeting takes place between the two leaders, and whether it leads to a breakthrough.  
Developments over the past few weeks provide some context for the Astana summit.

#### Two interviews and hope

**IN APRIL**, Prime Minister Modi told *Newsweek* magazine during an interview: "For India, the relationship with China is important and significant. It is my belief that we need to urgently address the prolonged situation on our borders so that the abnormality in our bilateral interactions can be put behind us."  
"Stable and peaceful relations between India and China are important for not just our two countries but the entire region and world", Modi said. "I hope and believe that through positive and constructive bilateral engagement at the diplomatic and military levels, we will be able to restore and sustain peace and tranquility on our borders."  
China reacted positively to the Prime Minister's framing of the border dispute.  
The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said the relationship between India and China was "about more than the boundary situation". The two countries "maintain close communication through diplomatic and military channels on handling issues related to the border situation and have made positive progress", she said.  
"We hope that India will work with China, approach the bilateral relations from a strategic height and long-term perspective, keep building trust and engaging in dialogue and cooperation, and seek to handle differences appropriately to put the relationship on a sound and stable track," the spokesperson said.  
**IN MAY**, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar expressed hope for resolving the remaining issues with China amid the bor-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with former Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and other members of a Congressional delegation in New Delhi on Thursday. The delegation had met the Dalai Lama earlier. PTI

der standoff in Ladakh. These outstanding issues primarily revolved around "patrolling rights" and "patrolling abilities", Jaishankar said in an interview to PTI.  
Asked about the likely timeline for resolving these issues, particularly in the light of Modi's remarks to *Newsweek*, Jaishankar said the Prime Minister had provided a "big picture" perspective.  
Limiting the dispute to "patrolling rights" and "patrolling abilities" was seen as a nuancing of the Indian position, pivoting away from the earlier stance of "disengagement" and "de-escalation".

#### Taiwan, Tibet, and leverage

While these instances built hope for a resolution after the Lok Sabha election, other developments spotlighted persisting complications.  
**FIRST**, an exchange of messages between the Prime Minister and Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te on the social media platform X — which sources said was the first public interaction between the two leaders — angered the Chinese, who saw this as a provocation.  
On June 5, the President, also known as William Lai, congratulated Modi on returning to power, and said he looked forward to "enhancing the fast-growing Taiwan-India partnership" and "expanding collaboration on trade, technology and other sectors to contribute to peace & prosperity in the Indo-Pacific". Modi thanked Lai and expressed hope for closer ties and a mutually beneficial economic and technological partnership.  
China protested "all forms of official interactions between the Taiwan authorities and countries having diplomatic relations with China", and asked India not to deviate from its commitment to the 'One China' policy.  
India and Taiwan do not have formal

diplomatic ties, and have instead focused on commerce, culture, and education. The profile of the relationship, now in its third decade, has been deliberately kept low owing to Chinese sensitivities.  
**SECOND**, a seven-member bipartisan delegation of the United States Congress met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala on Wednesday, where former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared that while the Tibetan spiritual leader's "legacy will live forever", Xi will "be gone and nobody will give [him] credit for anything".  
A day later, on Thursday, the delegation called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval.  
The Chinese reacted sharply, and "urged" the US to "adhere to its commitments of recognizing Xizang as part of China and not supporting "Xizang independence". China refers to Tibet as Xizang.  
Pelosi had ignored warnings from Beijing to visit Taiwan in August 2022. On June 12, the House of Representatives passed the bipartisan Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Dispute Act, which had already cleared the Senate.

#### The upshot and the outlook

How should these developments be read? Some analysts believe that while India has clearly shown its intent on resolving the border situation through the interviews given by the PM and Jaishankar, it has also sent out a signal through Pelosi's visit to the Dalai Lama ahead of a possible meeting between Modi and Xi in Astana.  
Some others believe that while New Delhi had initially wanted to resolve the border situation after the Lok Sabha election, it changed its mind after the NDA got a weaker-than-ex-

pected mandate — with the government wary of criticism that any reconciliation that was not on India's terms might draw.  
Stable borders are key for the government to focus on its agenda for economic growth, especially after the election results have shown that the BJP suffered due to the lack of jobs and rise in prices. The ongoing engagement between Australia and China offers insight that is relevant to India as well.  
Australia-China ties suffered a setback under the Centre-right governments of Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison. The change in government muted the high-decibel rhetoric from leaders on the right, and the Centre-left Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is seen to be engaging with China's leadership at the highest level, while not compromising on Australia's core interests.  
On the first visit by a Chinese Premier to Australia in seven years last week, Li Qiang said he had held "candid, in-depth and fruitful" talks with Albanese, and the two countries had agreed to manage their differences and disagreements properly.  
The last two meetings between Modi and Xi — on the sidelines of the G20 leaders meeting in Bali in November 2022 and on the margins of the BRICS summit in South Africa in August 2023 — did not produce positive outcomes. Bilateral ties remain hostage to the border dispute, and there has been hardly any political movement. Economic ties have sustained — bilateral trade touched a record \$ 136 billion in 2023 — but a heightened awareness of the security threat perception from China has led to a serious effort at decoupling by the Indian establishment.  
The Australian model holds possibilities, but several things, including Xi's personal political will, must fall in place.

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# Bihar quota struck down: what is the 50% ceiling that court relied upon?

APURVA VISHWANATH  
NEW DELHI, JUNE 20

PATNA HIGH Court on Thursday set aside notifications by the Bihar government increasing reservation in government jobs and educational institutions from 50% to 65%.  
"It is to break the stranglehold of a few at the expense and to the detriment of the many that reservation to backward classes was envisaged. But merit cannot be completely effaced and sacrificed at the altar of reparations. This was the principle on which the 50% limit was laid down for reservations," the High Court said.  
What is the history of the 50% ceiling for quotas, and why is it litigated so often?  
**The Indra Sawhney ruling**  
The 50% ceiling was introduced by the

Supreme Court in its landmark 1992 decision in *Indra Sawhney v Union of India* in order to ensure "efficiency" in administration.  
The 6-3 majority verdict that upheld the 27% quota for socially and economically backward classes (SEBC) set two important precedents — first, it said that the criteria to qualify for reservation is "social and educational backwardness"; second, it reiterated the 50% limit to vertical quotas that the court had laid down in earlier judgments (*M R Balaji v State of Mysore*, 1963, and *Devadasan v Union of India*, 1964). The 50% limit would apply unless in "exceptional circumstances", the court said.  
The *Indra Sawhney* ruling has been reaffirmed in a host of cases since then. But efforts to breach the 50% limit have also continued, in Bihar and other states, and gained significant political currency. During the Lok Sabha election campaign, Congress leader

Rahul Gandhi promised a caste census and extension of reservation beyond 50%.

#### Legal challenge to ceiling

The 50% limit is under challenge before the Supreme Court. Despite the pending challenge, laws that could breach the limit have been set aside by the courts. The only exception has been the 10% quota for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) introduced in 2019.  
In November 2022, a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court upheld the EWS quota in a 3-2 verdict that said the 50% ceiling applied only to SC/ ST and OBC quotas, and not to a separate quota that operated outside the 'backwardness' framework which was "an entirely different class".  
"Moreover...the ceiling limit...has not been held to be inflexible or inviolable for all

times to come," the majority opinion stated.  
This observation has led to questions on whether the SC might reopen the *Indra Sawhney* question itself. In the minority opinion by two judges, there was a general refrain on whether it is permissible to breach the 50% ceiling since the issue is pending before the court. They sounded a "cautionary note" that "permitting the breach of the 50% rule as it were" could become a "gateway for further infractions, resulting in compartmentalisation".  
Critics of the 50% ceiling argue that it is an arbitrary line drawn by the court, even as the legislature has consistently attempted to push back.  
On the other hand, an argument is made that breaching 50% would be antithetical to the principle of equality since reservations

are an exception to the rule. Dr B R Ambedkar's speech in the Constituent Assembly is often quoted as caution that reservations without qualifiers could "eat up the rule of equality".  
However, there is also a view that reservations are a feature of the fundamental right to equality, and part of the basic structure of the Constitution. In its ruling of 2022 upholding the 27% OBC quota in NEET, the SC had said that "reservation is not at odds with merit but furthers its distributive consequences".  
This reframing of the question on substantive equality rather than formal equality will be tested when the SC takes up the *Indra Sawhney* question once again, armed with the learnings from more than three decades of jurisprudence on reservations since the implementation of the report of the Mandal Commission.

#### Reservation in other states

The 76th constitutional amendment in 1994 inserted the Tamil Nadu reservation law breaching the 50% limit into the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution. The Ninth Schedule provides the law with a "safe harbour" from judicial review under Article 31A of the Constitution. Laws placed in the Ninth Schedule cannot be challenged for reasons of violating any fundamental right protected under the Constitution.  
In May 2021, a five-judge SC Bench unanimously struck down a Maharashtra law that provided reservation to the Maratha community as unconstitutional, holding that the quota limit could not exceed 50%. With the implementation of the Maratha quota, reservation in the state could have gone up to 68%.  
Similar to the Maratha issue are the cases of Patels in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh.







# THE IDEAS PAGE

## A US lesson for Krishi Bhawan

In Shivraj Singh Chouhan, India has an agriculture minister who has both understanding and passion for the sector. But he will need to be empowered



HARISH DAMODARAN

IF YOU, AS someone said, give the government an idea, they will appoint a joint secretary for it. You give a big idea, they'll create a ministry.

This is precisely the kind of fragmentation in the name of having dedicated departments and promoting specialisation that India's agriculture sector has been victim to.

At the time of Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet had a single Minister of Food and Agriculture — Rajendra Prasad — who went on to be the first President of India. The governments that followed, Nehru's as well as that of Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, also had only one food and agriculture minister. That included the no-nonsense C Subramaniam, without whom neither the Green Revolution nor possibly the White Revolution would have taken place.

During Indira Gandhi's prime ministerial tenure, "community development" and "co-operation" were made part of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in January 1966. In October 1974, the Ministry of Irrigation was merged with the Ministry of Agriculture, which was henceforth called Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation.

The agriculture ministers of this period, especially Subramaniam and Jagjivan Ram, were men of competence who also had the ear of the then prime ministers.

Subramaniam got Shastri to agree to the import of 18,250 tonnes of seeds of the semi-dwarf high-yielding Mexican wheat varieties, Sonora 64 and Lerma Rojo 64A, that literally seeded the Green Revolution. He was also instrumental in the setting up of the Agricultural Prices Commission and Food Corporation of India (FCI) that paved the way for the fixation of minimum support prices (MSP) and procurement of crops, mainly wheat and paddy, at the declared rates. The National Dairy Development Board, too, came into being no less due to Subramaniam. He backed Verghese Kurien's idea of headquartering the new institution at Anand in Gujarat (away from Delhi's bureaucrats), with the same fervour as trusting the capabilities of M S Swaminathan and other scientists at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute.

All these interventions happened during the mid- and late-1960s, when Subramaniam and Jagjivan Ram called the shots at Krishi Bhawan. The prime ministers listened to them. When Indira Gandhi invited Jagjivan Ram to become agriculture minister a second time in 1974, he insisted on holding the irrigation portfolio as well. He was clear, and she understood, that agricultural progress wasn't possible without farmers having access to water for irrigating their crops.

Cut to the present times, when the agriculture ministry is a pale shadow of its past. The fragmentation or hollowing out started from around the mid-1970s, when fertilisers (December 1975), rural development (August 1979; it was initially called rural reconstruction), irrigation (January 1980) and food & civil supplies (February 1983) were spun off



C R Sasikumar

into separate ministries.

The centrifugal tendencies increased with the establishment of a Ministry of Food Processing Industries in July 1988 and the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority under the Ministry of Commerce in February 1986. The various statutory commodity boards for spices, rubber, coffee, tea and tobacco also function under the Ministry of Commerce. The Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) and the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) are, likewise, under the administrative control of the Ministry of Textiles and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change respectively.

The fragmentation has only worsened under the Narendra Modi-led government. An independent Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying came into existence in May 2019 and, more recently, a Ministry of Cooperation in July 2021.

The agriculture ministry, in a nutshell, has been reduced to a shell of its former self. Policy formulation with regard to key farm inputs — fertilisers and water — are outside its purview. Marketing and MSP procurement of foodgrains and cotton are with FCI and CCI that report to other ministries. There are dedicated ministries/organisations for value addition (food processing) and export promotion (APEDA), too. Agricultural research and education are, thankfully, still part of it. However, approvals for commercial cultivation and even field trials of genetically-modified (GM) crops are granted by the GEAC — ostensibly because these are inherently "hazardous" products, whose "release into the environment" requires special regulation.

One can understand the logic for a separate rural development ministry: Agriculture might be rural, but not all that is rural is agriculture. Agriculture is ultimately about farmers and their produce, coming straight from the fields as crops or after being fed to live-

The model should be the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the sole federal agency responsible for public policy on farm production and land conservation, food, nutrition, research, marketing, foreign trade and rural development (which extends to supporting entrepreneurship, housing and utilities) in that country. It is headed by a single secretary (read minister) of agriculture, who reports directly to the US President. The USDA also works with two other agencies — the US Food and Drug Administration and the US Environmental Protection Agency — for regulating GM crops based on science and safety of the final product for human, plant and animal health.

stock, poultry or aquatic organisms. What's input for animal agriculture is basically the output of crop agriculture — whether maize, wheat straw, fodder grass, soyabean meal, cottonseed oilcake or rice bran — just as an output of the former (dung) is input for the latter. They need to be viewed as an integrated whole. Policymaking cannot be in departmental silos that operate virtually independently of each other.

The model should be the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the sole federal agency responsible for public policy on farm production and land conservation, food, nutrition, research, marketing, foreign trade and rural development (which extends to supporting entrepreneurship, housing and utilities) in that country. It is headed by a single secretary (read minister) of agriculture, who reports directly to the US President. The USDA also works with two other agencies — the US Food and Drug Administration and the US Environmental Protection Agency — for regulating GM crops based on science and safety of the final product for human, plant and animal health.

In Shivraj Singh Chouhan, India finally has an agriculture minister who, like Sharad Pawar in the previous United Progressive Alliance dispensation, has both understanding and passion for the sector. He's well-equipped to deal with the two primary challenges that Indian agriculture faces today — climate change (especially heat waves and irregular rainfall patterns) and making farming remunerative in order to retain talent in the countryside.

From reports, Chouhan has already hit the ground running. But to be a Subramaniam, Jagjivan Ram or even Pawar, he needs to be empowered, politically and administratively. And that should come from the top, like it did from Shastri and Indira Gandhi.

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## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"This year's World Refugee Day theme — solidarity with refugees — envisions a world where refugees are welcomed. This includes keeping our borders accessible, acknowledging their contributions, and addressing the hurdles they face... Ultimately, solidarity comes from empathy and compassion." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

## Out with the bad laws

With the election of a new Parliament comes the opportunity to do away with legislation that puts the rights of citizens at risk



ZERO HOUR

BY DEREK O'BRIEN

NARENDRA MODI'S BJP ran the government in India for 10 years. That government has been rejected. So we have a new starting point going forward. As Parliament is reconstituted after the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, let's be straight up. The following laws should be reconsidered and repealed to ensure justice, equality, liberty for all citizens.

**Citizenship Amendment Act:** As the Citizenship Amendment Bill was introduced in Parliament in 2019, the country protested over concerns that coupled with the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), it could lead to the disenfranchisement of many Indian citizens. Home Minister Amit Shah's insistence that the NRC would be implemented nationwide, despite the disastrous pilot project in Assam — where around 6 per cent of residents were left out of the final NRC list — exacerbated these concerns. If this exclusion rate is extrapolated nationally, crores of Indians could potentially become stateless.

**Criminal Law Bills:** The recent arbitrarily-enacted Criminal Law Bills, require urgent reconsideration and repeal since they encompass the provisions on marital rape and sedition, and pose the risk of "police raj" by criminalising "resisting, refusing, ignoring or disregarding to conform to any direction given by a police officer". This is a slippery slope to authoritarianism and undermines fundamental freedoms. The devil is in the details. These laws, with their significant discrepancies and inherent injustices, need thorough scrutiny and stakeholder consultations. (This columnist was a member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs where constructive suggestions and voices of dissent from members of the Opposition were ignored in the final recommendations.)

**Marital Rape Exception:** Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita deals with the offence of rape but provides an exception for marital rape, stating that "sexual intercourse or sexual acts by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under eighteen years of age, is not rape". This exception stems from archaic English laws that did not recognise men and women as equals. It undermines the fundamental principle that rape is a violation of personal autonomy and bodily integrity, regardless of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. It's high time we bid

farewell to this outdated notion.

**Sedition:** The use of Section 124A of the IPC (the old sedition law) had been kept in abeyance following a Supreme Court order in May 2022. The court had given the government time to reconsider the law. Subsequently, the Home Minister claimed that sedition has been removed from the list of offences in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. This new version avoids the term "sedition" but introduces the vaguely-defined offence of "endangering the sovereignty, unity, and integrity of India". This broad definition, contrary to the 22nd Law Commission's recommendation for clarity, leaves room for misuse and threatens to stifle dissent and protest.

**The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners Act, 2023:** The Act changes the composition of the selection committee to appoint Election Commissioners. The Supreme Court's directive that the Chief Justice should be a part of the Committee was disregarded. The Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition (Lok Sabha), and a nominated Union cabinet minister now make the selection, giving the Union government total control over the selection.

**The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2023:** The Act empowered the Union government to exclusively auction mining leases and composite exploration licences for certain critical high-value minerals such as cadmium, selenium, nickel, cobalt, tin, etc. It also dispensed with the forest clearances required for mine reconnaissance and prospecting operations. It is critical to point out that the Act allows sub-surface excavation as part of reconnaissance, which had been prohibited under the 1957 Act. The environmental consequences of such invasive operations can be severe and irreversible, undermining sustainable development goals and disregarding previously existing environmental protections.

**The Transgender Persons Act, 2019:** The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, only recognises "sexual abuse" with a maximum punishment of two years as opposed to life imprisonment for rape of women. This punishment is insufficient and discriminatory. The law on rape should be inclusive and extend its protection to transgender women, ensuring they receive the same legal safeguards and justice as cisgender women.

**The Aircraft Act, 1934:** The law defines an aircraft as "any machine which can derive support in the atmosphere from reactions of the air". It includes "balloons, whether fixed or free, airships, kites, gliders and flying machines". So, yes, your childhood kite is basically an aircraft, and your backyard might just be an aerodrome!

The writer is MP and leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### BJP's UP LOSS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Rearview mirror' (IE, June 20). Considering how crucial UP is in the country's political landscape, the lacklustre performance of the BJP in the state deserves a long, hard look. Whether a wrong selection of candidates or too much dependency on brand Modi, the saffron party, a quick learner, can bounce back. Having said this, the verdict is also a reality check for the think tank of the party. Some ideas do not sell beyond a point. What, hopefully, we will now see are some chastened leaders of the BJP, willing to give an ear to others. No more riding roughshod over the opposition.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

### NOT A 'BAD APPLE'

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Don't wait for KAVACH' (IE, June 20). If KAVACH had been installed on the section concerned, it would have prevented the collision but could not have stopped the driver from making a mistake. The reason why it is so difficult to eliminate human error is that this is not the basic cause of the failure but a symptom of a deeper problem plaguing the system. It looks at human error through the prism of the "bad apple" theory — it believes that the system is safe but for those few unreliable people in it who should be identified and made an example of. The focus should be on removing systemic infirmities that cause train accidents.

SS Paul, Nadia

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Rearview mirror' (IE, June 20). A week is a long time in politics, and yet, many days past the BJP's debacle in UP the Lok Sabha polls, there is not a hint of a murmur over CM, Yogi Adityanath — his halo endures. In contrast, Shivraj Singh Chouhan of Madhya Pradesh favoured by the RSS, was sought to be kept away from the limelight, despite his many electoral successes. Even his CM's chair was frequently unsteady. While Chouhan is getting his rightful recognition today at the centre table, the BJP seems to be circumspect on its post-electoral road map on UP leadership. All parties have a few independent-minded satraps with clout and the BJP is no exception, as Yogi Adityanath lords over its bastion in UP. It is prudent perhaps, to avoid a self-inflicted wound from a double-edged sword.

R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

### GENDER GAP REPORT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Costs of inequality' (IE, June 20). The WEF's Global Gender Gap index has ranked India 129 out of 146 nations on the list. The data reflects a troubling reality in stark contrast to the India growth story. The methodology of arriving at the conclusions may be open to debate, but numbers don't lie. It would be prudent to heed the larger message. A notable positive is India's high ranking on gender parity in secondary education enrollment. Ranked 65th in the parameter of political empowerment of women, it is 10th on parity in the number of years with female and male heads of state over the last 50 years. The women's reservation legislation could be a transformative moment, provided the political leadership accords the issue the seriousness it deserves.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

## In defence of NEP

Why criticism of National Education Policy is premature and wide of the mark



ABHINAV PRAKASH

THE NEW NATIONAL Education Policy (NEP) was implemented in 2020, replacing the outdated NEP of 1986. This long-awaited reform, delayed for 34 years, highlights the indifference of successive governments in updating education policy to cater to the rapidly changing needs of the post-1991 reform period. A major issue with the old system was the low employability of the youth graduating from schools and colleges. The rapidly changing technological environment exacerbated this problem.

The generation that attended college in the 1990s or early 2000s could hardly have anticipated the industries they would work in in the coming decades. The advent of the internet, Industry 4.0, and shifting global trade patterns have dramatically altered the industrial landscape and, with it, the employment market. Many of the industries, businesses and job profiles today did not exist 20 years ago.

Today, more than ever, we need an education system that provides not only in-depth knowledge in various disciplines but also the essential skills required to navigate the modern world. These include soft skills, technical skills, research capabilities, analytical and problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking. Additionally, the system should emphasise cultural and value-based education, enabling students to contribute meaningfully to society and the nation.

This comprehensive approach is encapsulated in the NEP through credit-based

courses, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded education. However, the implementation of the NEP has sparked considerable debate. Some critics argue that it dilutes the core content of higher education and burdens students and educators with bureaucratic requirements. While these concerns are well taken and the suggestions are valuable, it is important to recognise that adopting a new system and overhauling the vast education sector is an ongoing task. Many of these criticisms are premature and, in some cases, over-emphasised.

The NEP shifts all programmes towards outcome-based learning. Under this approach, each course has specified learning outcomes, and assessments are designed to measure these outcomes. It offers students the flexibility to develop their academic path based on their talents, interests, and career goals. However, it does not mean students can pick a random assortment of courses without a core foundation. Institutions like Delhi University have structured their degree programmes to allow students to choose a major and a minor discipline for in-depth study alongside a variety of electives that provide a multidisciplinary perspective.

The NEP's design includes generic electives, ability and skill enhancement courses that equip students with skills for employability or entrepreneurship. Students are no longer envisioned as mere consumers of knowledge but active partners in learning. The UGC has proposed a model structure,

but universities have the autonomy to design the final syllabus. Much of the criticism is centred around the syllabus design and content, but it's a university-specific issue and not a failure of the NEP.

Some universities — Delhi University for instance — have done excellent work in the adoption of the NEP, with continuous updates according to feedback from stakeholders, as a complex adaptive system should. Delhi University has adopted a higher credit framework than prescribed by the UGC, allowing students to earn additional credits to further their academic knowledge.

The NEP also recognises the varied backgrounds and circumstances of students. Previously, students who left a degree programme to earn a livelihood were seen as dropouts. The NEP now allows these students to exit and re-enter programmes, facilitating lifelong learning. Additionally, students gaining industrial exposure related to their studies can earn credits through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which counts towards their degree after proper assessment.

The curriculum and syllabi of undergraduate programmes have been revamped to emphasise hands-on learning for effective education. Tutorials, an essential part of courses without practical components, are now credited through continuous assessment, ensuring rigorous academic standards. While it is true that more resources

are needed to realise the full potential of the NEP, infrastructure development is a long-term process and cannot be expected to be completed within a year or two. The NEP also integrates internships, apprenticeships, projects, and community outreach within degree programmes, providing students with practical experiences crucial for real-world applications.

A lot of opposition seems to come from the old guard, still wedded to a socialist worldview, exhibiting a disdain for markets, industrial experience, and internships. It is important here to consider the views of B R Ambedkar, who advocated for education that focuses on employability for the vast majority of India. Ambedkar believed that industrialisation and economic growth were essential for the country's progress and the emancipation of the masses. He advocated for an education system built on the synergy between academia, industry and the market to ensure the creation of better human resources and the employability of individuals from disadvantaged sections. The NEP is an opportunity to undo the damage of the previous decades when such advice was ignored and academia was de-linked from the wider society. It is time for academia to be responsive to the requirements of the masses and markets.

The writer is assistant professor at Ramjas College, Delhi University and national vice-president of the BJP's youth wing



## Much to gain from labour

Definitive policy steps are needed to salvage industries that create jobs from a precipitous decline

THE HEADLINE GDP numbers of 8.2% for FY24 and 7.2%, predicted by the Reserve Bank of India and Fitch, for FY25 must be comforting, especially as consumer confidence is reported to be rising both at home and abroad, and the rural demand is seen slowly recovering from a long trough. Moreover, the share of private sector in the “newly announced investment projects” has been above 80% over the last several quarters, a smart recovery from the nadir of 50%. The concerns, however, are as much regarding the sustainability of the current growth paradigm and its credibility, as they are about the travails of those left out like the sizeable number of small and medium companies, the unorganised sector units, and earners of sustenance wages.

There is enough proof to conclude that the share of a clutch of large corporates in the GDP has gone up quite significantly in recent years, at the expense of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), and several thousands of decent jobs they used to provide. This has apparently raised the incremental capital output ratio significantly. Each unit of output is already much harder to produce than it was before the pandemic. It's also worrisome that different sets of economic data don't easily reconcile with one another any longer — a gap of over 4 percentage points between the growth rates of the GDP and private consumption in FY24, for instance. Gross fixed capital formation at 33.5% of the GDP in FY24 was led by real estate demand, rather than industrial investments.

There is also the question of whether and how much the GDP estimate was boosted by the tweaking of sparse MSME data in tune with corporate-sector value addition, even while the wedge between the two has apparently widened. The way the economy is going can be well illustrated from the fact that exports from key job-generating sectors like textiles and garments, leather and leather products, diamond and gold jewellery, and marine products were 12% lower than in FY18 in absolute dollar terms. Actually, in most of these sectors, 2023 exports were lower than the 2015 levels. So, while these industries together accounted for nearly 30% of the country's total merchandise exports in FY18, their share dropped steeply to 18% in FY24.

For a better economic balance and productivity spike, the sectors holding employment potential should receive policy support. The production-linked incentives or the massive sops for semiconductor fabrication units would need to be supplemented with measures aimed at bolstering labour productivity, wages, and job creation, and thereby broad-based consumption. India's textile industry has seen massive investments in the spinning sector thanks to a liberal interest subsidy scheme that ran for two decades, and the removal of growth-stunting reservations. Yet, even as China ceded quite a bit of its share in the global textiles market, the gainers were Bangladesh and Vietnam, not India.

Worse, the European Union carbon tax is a looming threat for the sector. The policy bias favouring the upstream man-made fibre (polyester and viscose) players still requires to be fully corrected. Import tariffs for key inputs and synthetic fabrics must come down further. Lowering of goods and services tax rates for the textile value chain, heightened co-lending by banks and non-banking finance companies to the whole spectrum of MSMEs, and effective use of competition regulations are also necessary. Gems and jewellery units would require debt relief, as their prospects finally look bright, thanks to the free trade agreement with the UAE, and other such pacts on the anvil.

## Nvidia's explosive growth masks AI disillusionment

DOES ANYONE IN Silicon Valley know the saying, “The bigger they are, the harder they fall?” Perhaps it's just a matter of time before they will.

Tech company leaders should be wincing at the rapid ascension of Nvidia Corp. now that the artificial intelligence rally has propelled the chipmaker to become the world's most valuable company. This is a firm that sells coveted AI chips to a handful of cloud giants who are reaping the short-term benefits of AI hype, even as things are looking murkier downstream. It's hard to see how Nvidia chief executive officer Jensen Huang will sustain such growth (even as he steers his company into selling software), and he can thank himself and his peers. Tech giants like Alphabet Inc., Amazon.com Inc., and Microsoft have warped expectations for generative AI's contribution to profits. They will pay for that if they don't temper expectations.

Further down the value chain, away from the glow of Nvidia, lurk signs of discontent. Businesses have cut back on whizzy new AI tools out of concern for hallucinations, cost, and data security. The proportion of global companies planning to increase spending on AI over the next 12 months has slipped to 63% from 93% a year earlier, according to a recent survey of 2,500 business leaders by software company Lucidworks Inc. Meanwhile, just 5% of companies in the US are using AI, according to the Census Bureau.

If you were to measure the malaise with the Gartner Hype Cycle, AI would be deep in the “trough of disillusionment”.

Gartner's chart illustrates a common path for new technology and suggests a “plateau” can be reached once its true usefulness registers in the market's consciousness. How to get there? First, tech companies need to identify where their hype machine has gone wrong. They didn't set expectations for AI's capabilities too high; they framed its use as being too general purpose.

You can partially blame that on Sam Altman, who leads OpenAI, and Demis Hassabis, who leads Google's AI efforts, who both chased lofty goals of building computers with “general” intelligence before they sparked the recent AI arms race. Artificial general intelligence (AGI) is a vague term referring to computers that can surpass the multifaceted abilities of humans and thus fix myriad problems. There lies the issue.

Sometimes, tech companies have a clear North Star to aim for. Think of Salesforce Inc.'s vision to help companies better connect with their customers with its software tools, or Netflix Inc. trying to become the world's leading entertainment service with streamed content. OpenAI's and Google's AGI goals are even grander, so much so that they've lost all meaning, from creating abundant wealth for humanity, according to Sam Altman, to solving climate change and curing cancer, according to Hassabis.

The truth about AI is that it can be useful and even financially beneficial when people are given time to experiment with it. The technology's biggest proponents should remember how the advent of mobile first took off, with office workers bringing their early iPhones and other personal devices into work and demanding that IT plug them into the corporate email system. Much the same phenomenon could happen with generative AI, as some of the most successful case studies come from individuals who use it for personal productivity.

AI isn't yet a jack-of-all-trades but a master of a few. The sooner business leaders realise they can apply it to an array of niches and not for everything, everywhere, all at once, the sooner they can make the technology useful for them. But they'll need more level-headed guidance from tech firms, which must resist pitching AI as a general-purpose quick fix and “magic”. Such rhetoric is fuel for a bubble if they don't.

AS THE WAR between Russia and Ukraine rages, leaders of the seven most industrialised countries announced at the G7 summit in Italy that they would use proceeds from Russia's frozen assets in Western central banks to give Kyiv a loan of \$50 billion. Yet, the G7 Summit is not the only move afoot in dealing with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A pivotal peace summit in Bürgenstock, Switzerland, organised by the latter, has been, at present, the most far-reaching effort to help resolve the over two-year war. Several countries agreed to send representatives, including India, which sent a senior official. Moscow was not invited to the summit, which makes the possibility of brainstorming ways to put an end to the conflict, let alone ending it, a non-starter. Indeed, China, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have stated clearly that progress without Russia's participation in the summit would be difficult.

The Russians, for their part, have set their preconditions, making it clear that they want Ukrainian neutrality with Kyiv, forsaking any commitment to joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Paired to this is the demand made by President Vladimir Putin that the international community concede and accept the Russian annexation and occupation of four Ukrainian oblasts — Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia. The Russian aim is to pre-empt or even compel the West to pressure Ukraine into conceding its demands that would significantly compromise Ukrainian sovereignty and integrity. Nevertheless, Ukraine's people seem to think otherwise. Polling data across multiple public opinion surveys conducted in Ukraine indicates clearly that

### HARSH V PANT KARTIK BOMMAKANTI

Respectively, vice president-studies and foreign policy, and senior fellow, strategic studies, Observer Research Foundation

roughly 60% of Ukrainians support the war effort and believe that all of Ukraine, including under Russian occupation in the east and south-east, will be liberated. Notwithstanding the optimism of the Ukrainian public, battlefield realities present a grim picture for Kyiv.

Irrespective of the measures by the G7 states in using Russia's frozen assets lodged in the West to finance Ukraine and the well-meaning intentions behind the Swiss-sponsored peace summit, Moscow's offensive in Ukraine has acquired considerable intensity, visibly demonstrated by its assault on the Kharkiv region in north-east Ukraine. This was the region that Moscow had attacked and occupied and was part of a key axis of attack during the initial stages of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the subsequent counteroffensive, Ukrainian forces liberated the Kharkiv region, imposing significant costs on their Russian invaders. Russian forces, in their latest offensive (which started on May 10, 2024), advanced into the border town of Vovchansk, roughly 75 kilometres from Kharkiv city. By mid-May, Russian forces gained 278 square km of territory in the Kharkiv region, establishing another front for the Ukrainians,



who hitherto, had to contend with combating the Russians in the east and south-east since the onset of the Russian invasion in 2022.

Moscow's gains have been a direct consequence of Western, especially American, military aid drying up, which was only released on April 24 following the passage of aid bills worth \$60 billion stalling for months in the United States Congress. This interregnum in the supply of military equipment created a window of opportunity for the Russians to retake territory they had lost following hard-fought Ukrainian gains, which Ukrainian forces had to surrender due to the lack of artillery rounds, surface-to-air missiles, armoured vehicles, and anti-tank

weapons. Indeed, getting the latter set of capabilities to Ukraine's forward deployed forces still remains the most pressing and immediate battlefield necessity for Kyiv. Preventing Russian fighter aircraft launching stand-off attacks from within Russian airspace is another urgent requirement for Ukraine, which Ukrainian forces can only counter if they secure long-range surface-to-air missiles. Coupled with these supply constraints, which have started to flow to the Ukrainians, there

Ukrainian leadership is confronting shortages to meet recruitment targets, which the Russians too face, but not as much as Kyiv

## Power infra needs climate resilience



### SOMESH KUMAR

Partner and leader, power and utilities, EY India

CLIMATE CHANGE POSES many challenges to humankind. As the planet warms, extreme weather events become more frequent and intense, sea levels rise and ecosystems shift, all of which disrupt electricity generation, transmission, storage, distribution, and utilisation of energy. Deeper studies would help us understand the scale of the impact better and possible ways of mitigation.

Recently, I experienced the ineffectiveness of air conditioning and refrigerators in Kolkata. At 40°C with relative humidity of 50-55%, I felt very uneasy. Google said “feels like temperature is 48°C”. The cooling devices were unable to pump out the heat adequately, as the ambient temperature and humidity were high enough to draw more power for the desired amount of cooling. Most of our power infrastructure either becomes ineffective or loses efficiency due to climate change. Our forecasts and assumptions for designing, implementing, and operating the infrastructure must factor this in. Let us explore the impact of climate change on power infrastructure and potential solutions.

#### Heatwaves and energy demand

Peak demand continues to grow and reached 243 gigawatts (Gw) last year. Rising energy demand needs additional power generation capacities, and strains existing grids. In places where the urban heat island effect amplifies temperatures, air conditioning escalates energy consumption, adding pressure on ageing infrastructure.

#### Melting glaciers and hydropower

India has 145 Gw of hydropower, mainly commissioned on glacier-fed

river streams flowing from the Himalayas. Glacial meltdown and unusual rainfall in the Western Ghats affect hydropower generation. Forecasts made during the detailed project report development may become irrelevant, as many small hydropower projects are at risk from the changing course of rivers. Changes in glacier mass alter water availability and flow patterns, impacting the reliability and output of hydropower facilities. Also, more sedimentation and flooding caused by glacial melt or heavy rain further compromise the stability of the power system.

#### Wind shifts from wind farms

As of April, India has installed over 46 Gw of wind power. Climate change may alter regional wind patterns, affecting the distribution and intensity of resources in potential wind energy regions. Shifts in atmospheric circulation, changes in weather systems, and variations in temperature gradients can influence wind speed and direction, leading to fluctuations in power generation. Long-term monitoring and modelling of wind resources are essential for assessing the potential impact of climate change on wind farm performance and optimising site selection and turbine design.

#### Ambient heat and thermal power plants

Thermal power plants, including coal, natural gas, and nuclear facilities, rely on consistent access to water for cooling and steam generation. However, induced

shifts in precipitation patterns, prolonged droughts, and heatwaves pose significant challenges. As temperatures soar, power plants may struggle to dissipate heat. It is estimated that 30°C increase in ambient air temperature reduces the net power output by 18%, which decreases the mass flow rate of inlet air by 11%. On average, each degree of increase in ambient temperature results in 0.5% increase in consumption of coal.

#### Solar radiation on panels

Solar power is a key component of the energy transition. India has installed over 84 Gw of utility-scale solar power plants. Solar panels thrive on high radiation and cold temperature. High temperatures can reduce the efficiency of solar panels because of the temperature coefficient. As temperatures rise, solar panels become less efficient at converting sunlight into electricity — leading to decreased output and energy yields — and their lifespan are reduced.

Air pollution causes obstruction of solar radiation, altered cloud patterns, and greater variability in solar irradiance, affecting power generation from solar installations. Enhanced forecasting and grid flexibility are essential to mitigate the impact of solar variability.

#### Temperature and energy storage

Today we need energy storage devices to integrate intermittent power of renewable energy with the grid in forms of batteries. However, studies by the Federal

University of Technology in Nigeria show the life of a battery decreases by roughly 50% for an increase in 10°C of ambient temperature. A lead acid battery with a 10-year lifespan at 25°C would have an effective “design life” of only 2.5 years if kept at 40°C, and its performance drops below 100% within two years. This is applicable for lithium-ion batteries for operating temperature above 45°C. Therefore, adequate planning is required for battery thermal management systems in energy storage.

While these issues may not hit the headlines, they impact output and revenue. There have been several instances where climate change has hit power infrastructure. The following are examples: Phata Byung Hydroelectric Project and transmission lines in Uttarakhand were washed during a cloudburst and flash floods in 2013; rooftop solar power plants were swept away by cyclone Fani in Odisha 2019; over 150 megawatts of Rewa Ultra Mega Solar power plant in Madhya Pradesh (MP) was damaged due to heavy rainfall and mudslide in 2019; a considerable portion of the world's largest floating solar plant, at Omkareshwar Dam in MP, was damaged by high winds in April.

Climate change poses complex challenges to power infrastructure and addressing them requires proactive measures. The measures include ones to strengthen infrastructure resilience, diversify energy sources, enhance grid flexibility, and improve emergency preparedness. By investing in resilient infrastructure, enhancing forecasting capabilities, and embracing innovation, the power sector can navigate such challenges and transition to a sustainable, low-carbon future.

Forecasts and assumptions for designing, implementing, and operating power infrastructure must factor in climate change

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### Disarmament dialogues

The recent report from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) presents alarming insights into the global nuclear landscape. Key findings indicate significant developments: India's nuclear arsenal now exceeds Pakistan's for the first time. Meanwhile, China's nuclear programme has rapidly expanded, adding approximately 90 warheads in

a year to reach a total of 500, prompting scrutiny of its strategic intentions. Across all nine nuclear-armed states, there's a worrisome trend of modernisation. Moreover, amidst deteriorating major power relations, escalating nuclear stockpiles intensify the peril of nuclear weapon use in crises. These revelations underscore the urgent necessity for international dialogue and stringent arms control, emphasising the

imperative of nuclear disarmament despite the inherent uncertainties. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

#### Income tax concessions

Concessions on income tax are eagerly awaited in the full Budget to be tabled by the new government. A mere 2.2% of our adult population pays income tax. The pursuit of wealth creates a huge bonanza for a few, compounded by innovation and

technology, leading to a steep increase in income disparity. The zeal over taxes such as goods and services tax burdens the less privileged. That leaves the very rich and their fair share of the tax burden. Tax reforms will depend on political and economic conditions to then spawn arguments in support of a specific policy. —R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



## GOVT MUST UPGRADE NTA INFRA, ACT SWIFTLY AGAINST DELINQUENTS

THE controversy surrounding the conduct of the National Eligibility Cum Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NEET-UG) examination by the government-controlled National Testing Agency (NTA) and the cancellation of University Grants Commission's National Eligibility Test have brought into focus grave systemic flaws and threatens to undermine the credibility of the education system. After initially denying any wrongdoing, the government has admitted the lapses brought to light by the aspirants. Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan has said that "some irregularities" have been found and has promised strict action against those responsible.

The NTA is responsible for conducting crucial examinations such as the JEE, NEET, UGC-NET and CMAT. There have been problems galore in the way they have been conducted over the last few years. At the 2019 NEET exams, students complained of ambiguous and erroneous questions. The NTA had to release a revised answer key after admitting to some mistakes. At the 2020 JEE Main exams, the NTA faced technical glitches. In 2020, the UGC-NET aspirants found errors in the question papers and answer keys. The NTA admitted to the mistakes and revised the answer keys. Similar problems were faced at the CUET 2022 exams. There have also been allegations of leaks of questions and answer keys, and incorrect translation of questions from English to regional languages. Students have also faced the issues of last-minute changes in exam centres, delays in the release of admit cards and technical glitches. The harried student community has time and again demanded re-evaluation and re-tests and resorted to legal action. However, they have continued to face problems in these high-stakes exams.

The government needs to urgently step in to ensure proper functioning of the NTA. It needs to undertake a massive upgrade of the NTA's technological infrastructure and put in place robust security measures to avoid paper leaks. There is also a need for regular stakeholder engagement to identify areas of improvement in order to restore the credibility of the NTA examination system, which affects millions of students. Swift and strict action against those involved in indiscretions and paper leaks should precede the structural upgrade. The Supreme Court has rightly said that even if there is "0.001 percent negligence" on part of the NTA, it should be thoroughly dealt with.

## KANNUR SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO BLEED AGAIN

A 90-year-old man was recently killed in a blast in Kerala's Kannur district when he unwittingly tried to open a bomb he found in his neighbour's uninhabited plot. He had apparently gone there to collect coconuts when his eyes fell on the steel container. He suffered fatal injuries to his head and his hands were shattered by the blast. The police, who have started an investigation, say the blast was accidental. Though the bomb squad, which conducted a thorough inspection of the site, could not find any other bomb there, a few neighbours have alleged that the uninhabited plot has been used for criminal activities by political parties. They alleged that the police usually arrive at the scene of an explosion only after party workers have erased evidence and removed the crude bombs. Similar allegations have been raised by the Congress-led opposition—they staged a walkout in the assembly condemning the "cult of crude bomb violence" in Kannur.

It's not the first time that innocent people are getting caught in the state's political bomb culture. Amavasi, a rag-picker from Tamil Nadu, was injured in an accidental blast in Kannur in October 1998; he lost sight in one eye as a result. In September 2000, Asna, a girl who was playing in her house compound, lost a leg to a bomb blast. In all such incidents, innocents have lost life or limb without having anything to do with politics.

Violence is embedded in Kannur politics and no party is free of it—with the CPI(M) on one side, and the RSS, Congress and the IUML on the other. All parties have had 'martyrs' who are celebrated at political functions. The culture of violence can be brought down only if this political narrative is rephrased. And for this, all parties must come together. They should decide not to let Kannur bleed again. The CPI(M), being the ruling party, has more responsibility to ensure it. The government must ensure a detailed probe into the matter and the culprits must be brought to book for killing an elderly person in such a brutal manner. Kannur has been bleeding for quite a long time—it is time to put an end to it.

### QUICK TAKE

#### MANGROVES AS BIO-SHIELDS

HURRICANES along our eastern coast are likely to be more frequent and, at times, more intense than earlier. We also know that the oceans around India are rising—almost imperceptibly, but to devastating consequences. So it's reason to be thankful when a plan to restore mangroves—which is one of the most effective ways of minimising the impact of these changes—comes to fruition. As a recent post by a bureaucrat showed, mangroves planted over 25 hectares at Kudikadu village in Tamil Nadu's Cuddalore district have come to life. The Pichavaram mangroves support 840 species of flora and fauna. It's a project worth emulating all along the coast, right up to the Sundarbans.

HE recently held Lok Sabha elections were an eloquent testimony to the unwavering wisdom of the Indian electorate. Defying predictions and pundits alike and notwithstanding a repeat of government, the mandate of the sovereign has delivered a resounding message: we, the sovereign, will not tolerate the erosion of our civil liberties. We will raise our voice, loud and clear, against any law passed in defiance of this cardinal democratic principle that forms the bedrock of our nation.

Given this unequivocal fiat by the people, it is imperative that the latest iteration of the 'old establishment' must act accordingly. It therefore is necessary to have an immediate cessation on the implementation of the three controversial criminal law bills that are scheduled to come into effect from July 1, 2024.

For these bills, shrouded in contention and passed in undue haste after suspending a record 146 members of parliament, must be re-subjected to rigorous legislative scrutiny and informed debate in the newly constituted Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. This is fundamental to respecting the democratic processes and ensuring that the laws of our nation reflect the will of its citizens through the informed participation of its political representatives.

Before addressing the three contentious bills in detail, it is imperative to provide some historical context. On August 11, 2023, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) Bill, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS) Bill, and Bharatiya Sakshya Bill (BSB) were introduced in the monsoon session of parliament without adequate notice, denying the opposition the opportunity to object to their introduction.

Though the bills were referred to the parliamentary standing committee on home affairs, the informed dissent of many eminent members of the committee was not taken into consideration.

Finally, while the House was grappling with an unprecedented attack on its chambers and the opposition was raising concerns regarding the incident, 146 members of parliament were arbitrarily suspended, allowing the bills to be passed without opposition or even a semblance of an informed critique of its provisions. Currently, the Ministry of Home Affairs has notified that the three criminal law bills will be implemented on July 1, 2024.

These three criminal laws lack any substantial merit or any modicum of originality. Out of the 511 provisions in the IPC, only 24 sections have been deleted and 23 added. The rest have been merely renun-

The three bills were rushed through parliament without an informed debate. The new Lok Sabha must be allowed to scrutinise them before they come into force

## NEW CRIMINAL LAWS MUST GO THROUGH PARLIAMENT AGAIN

MANISH TEWARI

Lawyer, MP and former Union minister



SOURAV ROY

bered in the new BNS. All 170 sections of the Evidence Act have been retained in the new BSB. Some 95 percent of the CrPC has been cut, copied and pasted as the new BNSS. As a result, it systematically overhauls the foundational laws of the criminal justice system without offering anything substantial by way of reform.

Second, Section 173(3) of the BNSS shall make the registration of an FIR discretionary for an offence where the punishment ranges from 3 to 7 years. This disproportionately harms marginalised groups, who may be unable to get even FIRs registered.

Third, Section 187(3) of the BNSS introduces the troubling provision that allows the police to request custody for up to 15 days at any point during a 60-90 day custody period, even if the accused has cleared

the triple test for bail. This effectively hinders the accused's ability to secure bail and can prolong their detention significantly. The provision raises concerns about arbitrary detention, potential abuse of power, and the undue burden placed on those facing charges under the new law.

Fourth, Section 43(3) of the BNSS brings back handcuffs. Despite the Supreme Court rulings in *Sunil Batra vs Delhi Administration* and the *Prem Shukla* case, which restrict the use of handcuffs, the new law expands police power in this regard, potentially violating the right to human dignity for accused individuals.

Fifth, the new law rebrands sedition through Section 152 of the BNS. This criminalises four kinds of activities: subversive activities, secession, separatist

## IS THIS THE BEGINNING OF PETRODOLLAR'S END?

KAJAL BASU

Veteran journalist

since, despite the dollar itself suffering 537 percent inflation between 1974 and 2024.

"The international monetary system is facing its most difficult period since the 1930s," wrote H Johannes Witteveen, IMF managing director, in January 1974. It was in the light of these developments that the US-Saudi agreement came to pass.

The dollar's perkiness was paralleled by massive payment imbalances, especially in the debts of oil-importing nations. In



In 1974, Richard Nixon agreed with Saudi king Faisal that in return for denominating the kingdom's oil sales in dollars, the US would provide weapons and protection. That deal was not officially renewed earlier this month. The effect on the dollar's dominance could be immense

1973-77, the foreign debt of 100 developing countries increased 150 percent. The European countries instituted their own stabilising strategy. In 1972, the European Economic Community introduced the hyperconnected 'European snake', with countries controlling their currencies from fluctuating more than a percent from an agreed exchange rate. The 'snake' presaged the 1979 European Monetary System, and was ranged against the dollar.

The value of the dollar has never not sunk despite attempts by the US, Germany, Japanese and even OPEC to maintain a holding pattern. In 1979, many investors, including Saudi Arabia, began disholding US dollars as reserves, parking their surplus in alternative reserve

currencies like the Deutschmark, the Japanese yen, and the Swiss franc.

Indeed, the very day after the anniversary of the agreement passed without the two sides renewing it, the dollar's defenders were out in force trying to argue, first, that there had never been a US-Saudi petrodollar deal; second, that if there had been, it had not been comprehensive; and, third, that the dollar-denying news was a product of 'crypto speculators'. It hadn't, of course: the agreement has clearly not been renewed.

Saudi Arabia's move to unclip its oil revenues from the dollar might have been sudden, but it wasn't without warning. In March 2022, The Wall Street Journal reported: "Saudi Arabia is in active talks with Beijing to price some of its oil sales to China in yuan, people familiar with the matter said, a move that would dent the US dollar's dominance of the global petroleum market..." In January 2023, Saudi Arabia indicated that it would explore payment in other currencies. In April 2023, Nigel Green, founder and CEO of the deVere Group, one of the world's largest financial advisory and asset management companies, said, "Separately, two deals... would see Saudi Arabia's Aramco supplying two Chinese companies with a combined 690,000 barrels a day of crude oil, bolstering its rank as China's top provider of the commodity. It has been reported that Saudi Arabia is also in talks with Beijing to settle with the yuan instead of the dollar." Last year, China and Saudi Arabia signed a \$7-billion local currency swap agreement in efforts to boost trade reducing their dollar reliance.

The dollar's share in the world's foreign exchange reserves has decreased from more than 70 percent in 2000 to about 55 per cent in the last quarter of 2023, after exchange-rate and interest-rate adjustments. As of November 2023, the dollar's share in global payments was 47.08 percent. Its anticipated drop further into this year is expected to be led by the Saudi de-petrodollarisation.

(Views are personal)  
(kajalbasu@gmail.com)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Chinese net

Ref: *The Jammu jihad: Is Pak marching to Beijing's beat?* (Jun 20). The aims of both China and Pakistan with respect to India are nearly the same. Pakistan is entangled in the Chinese net and the result was the recent terror attacks—whether it was done willingly is another story.

Ravi Nair, Palakkad

#### Immediate action

Due to the inefficiency of the National Testing Agency, NEET exam deviation, NCET exam postponement, NET exam cancellation, etc, the future of students is being pushed into darkness. Immediate action should be taken against the guilty, and the future of students should be secured. The authorities must ensure such incidents do not recur in the future.

Nabnit Panigrahi, Rayagada

#### Ruining futures

It is unfortunate the NTA, the organiser and conductor of NEET, is ruining the future of students in so many ways, right from the beginning to the timing of declaring the results. It is alarming that the authorities are lethargic on the issue. The culprits should be served with severe punishments to prevent recurrence of such cruelties in the future.

SN Anil, Ernakulam

#### Full-time minister

Leakage of question papers of different competitive examinations are becoming common in some states and even in the Centre. Playing with the life of aspirants is horrible. A full-time minister for higher education is required now to tighten the strings of the examination processes.

B Chandra Sekhar Achary, Kesinga

#### Planning problem

Ref: *Improve crowd control at Jagannath Temple* (Jun 20). The opening of all four doors in the Jagannath temple is a blessing to devotees. But people are still facing lots of problems. One wonders why the government did not plan properly before executing such a decision.

S Chockalingam, Kottaram

#### Global apathy

Ref: *80 Indian Haj pilgrims die of extreme heat* (Jun 20). It is disgusting to see world communities remaining apathetic towards the death of about 1,000 Haj pilgrims over five days primarily due to the scorching conditions during their pilgrimage to Mecca. No nation bothered with even words of sympathy to the families of the deceased. One thing seems to be clear: no country is bothered if Earth is destroyed by climate change.

Manoharan Muthuswamy, Ramanathapuram

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# China Drives Away Autonomous Tesla

Seeding cars, robots likely Musk's moonshot

Elon Musk may have the right vision and his bets on self-driving cars and humanoid robots could, indeed, be the future, but there is no assurance that Tesla will deliver that future to car buyers or company shareholders. Musk expects to unlock 10 times the current Tesla value from autonomous cars, yet, its Chinese rivals are moving ahead in lane-navigation and battery economics. In its home market, Tesla is facing competition from carmakers who are producing EVs at price points approaching fuel-burning automobiles. Tellingly, Tesla is slow in its model refresh rate, which makes its valuation gap with other automobile companies — and Musk's staggering billion-dollar pay cheque — seem like moonshots.

Self-driving cars will do as much again for emissions as the switch to batteries charging on electricity generated from solar energy. This should come through fractional car ownership, with cars being shared among a larger pool of people, thereby pulling down production numbers. Yet, Tesla is not striding alone into this future of fewer cars ferrying more people. The automobile and technology industries are engaged in the pursuit of cars running on clean fuel and being



driven by artificial intelligence. It may be premature to declare a winner, unless you are Musk, whose vision would make him the world's first trillionaire.

His maths for humanoid robots is even more staggering. Tesla's projected profits from robots could be as much as \$1 trillion a year, that is, if the company can produce and sell a billion of these human robots. Musk sees every human being on the planet wanting to own one of these robots eventually, which frankly is a bit of a stretch for even the most ardent Musk fanboy. Tesla shareholders don't seem to be buying this in its entirety. They may have voted Musk his \$56 billion payout in a year of falling car sales and job cuts. It may not be much if some of Musk's vision for Tesla were to materialise, but the company's share price dropped with the latest update, as it has been doing of late.

# Like EV-Making Moths to FAME 3

A new edition of the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles (FAME) is on the anvil. It's what India needs to meet aspirations of an increasingly affluent and environmentally-conscious population, while augmenting competitiveness of its auto sector. GoI should go ahead with FAME 3 as part of its efforts to put the transport sector on a sustainable carbon pathway. The new 'localisation' norm — companies having to certify an amount of localised sourcing in EV manufacturing — may seem to be a bump on the road, but it can make more people have skin in the EV game. Checks to avoid a repeat of the abuse in FAME 2 must be robust. Domestic manufacturing must be supported, in a WTO-compliant manner.

Car and 3-wheeler sales — the latter grew by 22.6% from 44,641 in May 2023 to 54,729 in May 2024 — have been growing, making a bigger share of EVs sensible. Accelerating a shift from ICE to e will reduce demand for imported hydrocarbons, improving India's energy security and freeing up resources for other priorities.

Incentives for consumers will need to be attractive to make India-made EVs a preferable option, particularly as Chinese EVs look for new markets following tariffs announced by the US and EU. In its new iteration, FAME must develop infrastructure for charging stations and improve the ease of use.

Even as it incentivises private EVs, central and state governments mustn't deprioritise integrated mass public transport. Affordable, accessible and dependable, public transportation can provide a complement, not substitute, to private mobility. For more regular commute, public systems should be de rigueur, while EV travel, equivalent to a weekend take-out meal. This will help India to decongest, decarbonise, de-stress.



## JUST IN JEST

Kylian Mbappé may be sitting out tonight's game, but salute to he 'who nose'

# Resilience of the Broken-Nosed

Ace forward and national captain Kylian Mbappé broke his nose during France's opening game at the ongoing Euro tournament against Austria on Monday. Despite an elaborate face mask to hold his conk to his face being ordered — remember, Alexandre Dumas' The Man in the Iron Mask remains one of France's best-selling novels — he will sit out tonight's game against the Dutch. But with busted nose, Kylian is in good company. Men with their schnozzes bent and battered have stood in history — and anatomy — as testament to life's relentless determination. Consider another Frenchman, Auguste Rodin's 'Man with the Broken Nose', a bronze sculpture that defies convention. Created in 1863, this fellow's proboscis bears the battle scars of existence. Rodin's unthinking man's face screams, 'I've been through some tough stuff.' Michelangelo — also of broken nose courtesy a brawl with fellow sculptor Pietro Torrigiano — would have approved. Mbappé the footballer now bears the battle scars — courtesy a collision with the shoulder of Austria's Kevin Danso — of a boxer.

So, dear reader, next time you encounter a man with a broken nose, salute him. For, he's not merely a victim of an unfortunate accident but also a testament to tenacity. When life throws its best punches, channel your inner broken-nosed warrior.

By eliminating exemptions in direct taxes, complexities and litigation costs can be removed

# Off With the Headaches



Bibek Debroy & Aditya Sinha

In 1789, Benjamin Franklin famously declares, 'In this world, nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.' Yet, even the Grim Reaper would be puzzled by the antics of history. Take ancient Egypt, where pharaohs taxed cooking oil, compelling citizens to reuse, often rancid, oil. Or ancient Rome, where Emperor Vespasian imposed a tax on public urinals, quipping, 'Pecunia non olet' — Money doesn't stink. In Russia, Peter the Great taxed beards to encourage a clean-shaven populace, complete with beard tokens to prove tax compliance.

The quirks don't stop there. In medieval England, Henry I taxed the use of window shutters, leading to a spike in stuffy homes. In 18th c. England, there was even a tax on soap, which lasted over a century, and literally made cleanliness an expensive virtue. Fast forward to 19th c. Britain, when the infamous 'hat tax' required citizens to purchase a licence for wearing a hat, driving many to forgo headwear entirely.

Perhaps these quirky tax tales explain why many today still approach tax season with the same enthusiasm as one might for a root canal — it's a historical tradition of dreading the inevitable. Now, with the Union Budget around the corner, talks of tweaking the tax structure are making the rounds once again.

Tax reform has languished for years, despite numerous committees of



Go forth and collect!

ffering recommendations. Direct taxes, primarily split into corporate I-T (CIT) and personal I-T (PIT), have seen a significant shift. From 2000-01 to 2022-23, the share of direct taxes in total tax collection rose from 36.3% to 54.6%. However, the direct tax-to-GDP ratio plummeted from 2.3% to 1.2% in the same period. Collection costs have also dropped from 1.4% to 0.5%.

Individuals, Hindu undivided families, firms, companies, associations of persons, local authorities and artificial juridical persons all file direct taxes. Yet, more than half of those filing I-T returns report zero taxable income. This isn't primarily due to tax evasion, which is illegal, but rather tax avoidance through legitimate exemptions. These exemptions inflate compliance and litigation costs.

The 15th Finance Commission's report highlights the issue starkly. The stock of direct tax disputes was ₹9.99 lakh cr at the end of March 2020, up from ₹2.86 lakh cr in March 2012, growing at 16.3% annually. This dispute stock equalled 95% of direct tax

Without abolishing all exemptions, a comprehensive DTC remains out of reach, and tax avoidance and litigation will persist

collections in 2019-20, while recoveries from these disputes grew at a mere 3.7% a year.

Root causes include incentive structures for revenue officials and unnecessary appeals. Procedural tweaks can help. But without abolishing all exemptions, a comprehensive direct taxes code (DTC) remains out of reach, and tax avoidance and litigation will persist.

Currently, both CIT and PIT offer channels with fewer exemptions, but not zero. Most opt for the older, exemption-filled channel. The real challenge is to overhaul the system and incentivise a switch to the new, exemption-free channel. This works only if the tax rate differential between the two channels is significant.

Under the old regime, taxpayers can claim various deductions and exemptions like house rent allowance (HRA), leave travel allowance (LTA) and deductions under Sections 80C, 80D... This has historically been more popular due to the ability to reduce taxable income through these exemptions.

The new regime, introduced as part of Budget 2023-24, aims to simplify the tax process by offering reduced tax rates, but eliminating most exemptions and deductions. For example, under the new regime, no tax is levied on annual income up to ₹7 lakh, and differ-

ent slabs are set for higher incomes with minimal exemptions. This simplification is intended to reduce compliance burdens and make tax filing more straightforward.

To encourage a switch to the new system, GoI needs to ensure a significant differential in tax rates between the two channels. The new regime's attractiveness hinges on a clear, substantial reduction in tax rates that outweighs the benefits of the old regime's deductions. Eliminating all exemptions would also unify tax structures across different entities. Why should an unincorporated enterprise be taxed differently from an incorporated one? What relevance does a Hindu undivided family have today? From an equity standpoint, direct taxes are superior to indirect ones, though the latter are easier to implement. Despite rise in direct taxes' share of total taxes, their share of GDP has not increased. This should be higher; and so should tax buoyancy. The main culprit? Exemptions.

Without eliminating exemptions, complexities and litigation costs will persist. The ultimate goal is a unified, streamlined tax code that treats all entities equitably, making the tax system more transparent and easier to navigate.

The Department of Law and Justice's Legal Information Management and Briefing System (LIMBS) maintains a database of cases involving GoI. Despite some delays in data updates, it's evident that the finance ministry is entangled in the highest number of pending cases — about 1,88,000. Strikingly, 80% of these are tax-related disputes.

A significant portion of these tax cases likely stem from disputes over exemption claims. This underscores the urgent need for removing exemptions and reducing effective tax rate in new regime to make it enticing.

Debroy is chairman, and Sinha is OSD, research, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)



## The Path Of Yog

ANANDMURTI GURUMAA

Before the human mind learnt the skills of language or started writing on barks of trees, rishis, sages, had knowledge of the deeper recesses of the mind. They thoroughly understood the body, mind, senses, intellect, the essence of being and the supreme consciousness, for they were scientists who meticulously explored and precisely understood the profound intricacies of the inner world. There is consciousness in us, and then there is this consciousness in every cell, every atom and every molecule of the universe. Conjoining this micro-consciousness with the macro-consciousness is yog.

The opening sutra of one of the most celebrated yog texts — Patanjali Yog Sutra compiled almost 2,500 years ago — emphasises this when it says 'Atha Yoga Anushasanam', indicating yoga as a set of disciplined practices. Following the path of yoga is not about how much you know but how much you practice and how deep you are in the discipline. Aiming to integrate body, mind, intellect and breath, the discipline of yog entails eight steps in progression.

Maturity of each leading to the next: yam, niyam, asan, pranayam, pratyahar, dharana, dhyana, and culminating in the highest point of samadhi. Yog is not a panacea for diseases, as wrongly interpreted and touted by practitioners at large, although it is a fact that healthy body and mind are byproducts of its dedicated practice. But confining its practice to merely gaining good health would be like using an aeroplane to go shopping.

## Chat Room

### First, Bench Their Benchmarks

Apropos 'Make (Indices) in India' by Deepak Mishra (Jun 20), one had made a recommendation to alma mater IIT Bombay that was similar to the writer's proposal: 'It's time for us to make honest global indices in India.' The standard QS World University Rankings, in which IIT Bombay was then rated around #150, have a high weightage on research, number of papers published, etc. R&D may be a suitable yardstick for mature markets that have less scope to grow by redolting existing things and a desperate need to find new things. However, in a developing nation like India, there's a massive headroom to grow GDP to around \$10 tn by localising existing technologies.

T K Arun had expressed a similar opinion in 'Innovate, Not Copy-Paste' (May 29) on this page. Innovation is not invention and doesn't need R&D. India can innovate in many ways without having to do fundamental research or publish papers. In fact, it

would be a fool's errand to cross someone else's bar. The smart move for India is to define a new index that is more suited to India's needs and position it as an alternative to existing indices created by organisations beset with 'intellectual apathy — even arrogance', as the writer rightly observes.

KETHARAMAN SWAMINATHAN Pune

### Inflate Capex, Cap Inflation

This refers to 'Economists Bat for Capex Push, Fiscal Prudence and More Jobs' by Banikinkar Patanayak (Jun 20). Union Cabinet's announcement of ₹2.88 lakh crore expenditure is what the economists had advised for the budget. Equally important is private spending on consumer and light industries, and construction projects, for which bank credit is there for the asking. The ongoing major industrial and agricultural projects in infrastructure need a thrust on early completion. With a comfortable resources position, GoI needs to continue with its medium- and long-term projects that will check inflation. Inflationary expectations with the rising rural incomes call for working with states for thrust on MSMEs and improved transportation and logistics. We need competition among states on new projects with GoI offering to share expenditure of the winner.

KU MADAMUMBAI

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

## Global Retail Giants

The global retail landscape is constantly evolving, driven by shifting consumer habits and the growing dominance of online sales. Despite the rise of e-commerce, many of the top retailers worldwide generate the bulk of their sales in physical stores. However, as customers prioritise convenience and a wider selection of goods, e-commerce giants are capturing an increasing share of the retail market. Here's a list of the world's top 10 retailers by revenue, based on data from the National Retail Federation.

### World's leading retail giants by revenue

	Retailer (HQ)	Total Revenue (\$B)	Share of Domestic* (%)
1	Walmart (US)	628.6	84.7
2	Amazon.com (US)	355.1	70.4
3	Costco (US)	234.0	75.0
4	Schwarz Group (Germany)	176.4	32.0
5	The Home Depot (US)	151.6	93.7
6	Aldi (Germany)	145.4	25.8
7	Walgreens Boots Alliance (US)	117.8	89.3
8	Ahold Delhaize (Netherlands)	97.0	21.8
9	Alibaba (China)	94.1	97.3
10	Carrefour (France)	89.7	34.3

\*Share of Domestic Retail Revenue. Source: Visual Capitalist

# Get on the Job of Jobs



Amit Kapoor

India has a problem that has been baffling economists: its GDP is growing, but without a corresponding increase in employment. With the country foraying into the next phase of demographic shift, its working-age population is set to register a massive increase. Its share in the population is projected to rise to 60% in 2041. Generating adequate and good quality jobs is of the essence to keep pace with this burgeoning population.

So, why does economic growth not translate into jobs? ► **Man vs machine** Capital-intensive development causes a reduced requirement for human labour: ILO's 'India Employment Report 2024' released in March highlights joblessness in the highly educated youth pool, associating it with an unwillingness to avail of under-remunerated jobs and aspirations for better job prospects.

► **Services not enough** The services sector has limited scope to create as many jobs as other arenas, such as manufacturing and agriculture.

A thorough assessment of historical and current employment trends across sectors leads to a deeper dive into complexities of jobless growth. Mapping out the strengths and weaknesses of each sector is crucial for formulating strategies to enhance job-creating potential. In addition to understanding the employment-generation capacities of different sectors, India's low labour force participation rate (LFPR) poses a significant challenge.

Why has India struggled to create jobs for a large portion of its labour force, particularly for women and less-skilled workers?

► **Education no guarantee** Even thou-

gh the unemployment rate fell to 3.1% in 2022-23, marking a steady decline from 6% in 2017-18, the unemployment rate among the educated remains a worrisome trend. According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022-23, the unemployment rate is highest among graduates at 13.4%, followed by those with diplomas at 12.2%, and 12.1% for postgraduates.

The unemployment rate was lowest at comparatively lower levels of education, even reaching zero for the illiterate. It was 7.3% for those with secondary education and above.

This data has been consistent with past trends. For instance, the unemployment rate among graduates was 14.9% in 2021-22, and 8.6% for those with secondary education and above. In 2020-21, it was 15.5% and 9.1%, respectively. Unemployment rate among young persons (15-29 years) in the last three years (2020-23) has been between 12.9% and 10%, with the highest rate of unemployment among urban women (above 20% throughout the three years).

A fall in unemployment rate for persons over 15 years was accompanied by a rising share of the self-employed sector. This indicates that even when more jobs are created, they are concentrated in the informal sector, implying job insecurity and poor working conditions.

The ILO study further reveals: ► **Stagnant employment growth** While employment rate grew at an an-



In working condition

nual average of 1.6% from 2000 to 2012, GVA increased by 6.2% in the same period. However, between 2012 and 2019, employment growth was minimal, despite GVA growth of 6.7%.

► **Low labour mobilisation** Slow sectoral shift from agriculture to industry has been identified as a structural issue. Looking at sectoral transformation among agriculture, industry and service, the KLEMS database shows that agriculture continues to employ more than 45% of the workforce but contributes less than 20% in GVA.

► **Faulty service** Services account for over 50% of GVA, but only 30% of all jobs. While large firms have driven productivity, they have not significantly contributed to job creation. This has resulted in many workers being employed by small firms with limited growth opportunities.

Successive governments have tried to rewrite the jobless growth story. In the quest to become a global economic powerhouse, India's need for competitive job opportunities cannot be overstated. India needs to:

► **Pursue job creation opportunities** across a portfolio of services and industrial sectors. ► **Have more entry-level opportunities.** Barriers for those outside the active labour force, particularly low-skilled workers and women, must be reduced. ► **Create higher-productivity roles** to capitalise on current and emerging competitive advantages in India.

► **Restructure its educational system.** India is home to one of the youngest populations in the world, with a median age of 28 years. With more and more young people poised to enter the workforce, it's critical to align skills and capabilities with the evolving needs of a dynamic market.

Unlocking the potential of India's workforce through competitive job opportunities will be vital to realising the aspirations of millions, and a catalyst for inclusive and prosperous growth.

The writer is chair, Institute for Competitiveness

## Bell Curves ■ R Prasad

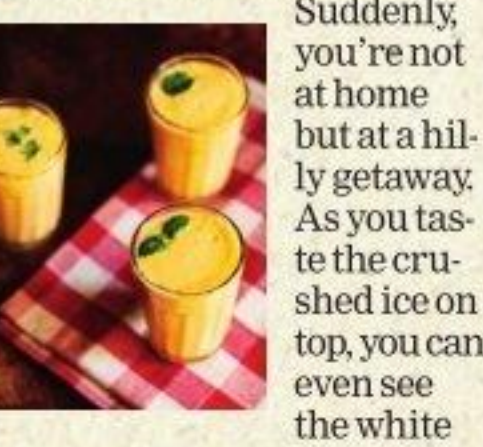


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## ALGO OF BLISSTECH


### Sipping Chilled Mango Lassi

It's blisteringly hot. No matter where you're tucked away, you need to chill. And then there's a secret weapon that transforms sweltering days into moments of sheer delight: the chilled mango lassi, a frosty glass of golden nectar. It is a cool, velvet hug for your taste buds. Creamy dahi meets ripe mango, and they waltz together in a swirl of just-right sweetness as if whispering, 'Forget the heat, we've got this.' Close your eyes and take that first sip.



Suddenly, you're not at home but at a hilly getaway. As you taste the crushed ice on top, you can even see the white peaks in the distance. Fresh mango chunks produce pure magic. The lassi dances on your tongue, balancing tanginess and sweetness. It's the taste of a happy summer — bottled and chilled. Technically it's a drink. But let's be real — it's an undercover dessert. Sip it slowly, and you'll find yourself wondering if you should grab a spoon. The mango pulp has disappeared into a cold, delicious surf. As an aam aadmi, you're suddenly an aristocrat having this glassful of cold luxury. It's a mini-vacation, one sip at a time.





CONTRAPUNTO

In school, you're taught a lesson and then given a test.  
In life, you're given a test that teaches you a lesson

TOM BODETT

# Pareekshak Pe Charcha

Even if accountability in NTA is fixed, questions will remain on the error-prone testing system

Education minister Dharmendra Pradhan's statement that NTA will be investigated, and the national testing system will be reformed, is unlikely, at this point, to reassure examinees who appeared for NEET and the just cancelled UGC-NET. While it's good that fixing accountability in NTA is now a ministerial concern, no fundamental change for the better can happen without asking tough questions on the entire process of conducting centralised exams.

**Testers' report card** | The scale of NTA's failures bears repetition. From CUET to JEE, NEET and UGC-NET, there have been far too many glitches, including those that have raised big questions on the integrity and competence of the testing agency. Such has been NTA's mismanagement that arguments against a single-exam authority have again resurfaced. So scattered is the agency's implementation and nodes of accountability that weeks after the NEET fiasco, the only action has been the cancellation of the exam for grace mark students – and empty platitudes. Absent was any sense of accountability.

**Loosely controlled** | Such centralised tests, the gateway to careers for lakhs of students, are in essence a public good. This is being squandered wholesale during implementation. Implementers are largely private sector, a burgeoning ecosystem of 'service providers' – exam centres, IT companies and medium-scale computer operations, which have sprung up solely to be the outsourced-infra required to conduct these mammoth tests. NTA cannot vouch for cybersecurity at thousands of centres where online tests are held. Nor for invigilators and personnel staffing physical centres. It leaves the system vulnerable to attacks, physical and remote, notwithstanding CERT-In security certificates, which are required per bid rules. Paper leaks, impersonation or proxies, and hacks are inevitable in such an unwieldy, loosely controlled organisation. CCTVs and audits aren't enough.

**Quick action** | Pradhan must constitute the high-level committee promptly, and staff it with professionals who command credibility. And the committee should not only be on a tight deadline, but it must also have the freedom to ask uncomfortable questions including on the desirability of a centralised testing system. If heads roll in NTA, it will address the accountability issue. But a new NTA team will not be effective unless old structural flaws of the national testing system are fixed.

# The Tibet Play

India must prepare for a post-Dalai Lama scenario. Its policy should always aim for leverage over China

A bipartisan US delegation meeting the Dalai Lama in Dharamshala has brought back the Tibet issue to the front burner. Of course, China has objected to the visit. The delegation included former US House speaker Nancy Pelosi, who had also visited Taiwan in 2022 despite Beijing's protests. Biden is going to soon sign the Resolve Tibet Act, which calls on Beijing to negotiate with the Dalai Lama or his representatives. This puts India, the host country of the Tibetan govt-in-exile, in a decision spot.

**Question of future** | Given the Dalai Lama's advanced age, the matter of his inevitable succession assumes salience. The US delegation affirmed that Washington would not allow Beijing to interfere with Dalai Lama's succession. Meaning, it will not accept a Beijing-appointed Dalai Lama. India, however, has remained relatively quiet on the matter. But its opinion will matter for the future of the Tibetan movement. It must start thinking now.

**Moral imperative** | India is expected to continue its support to the Tibetan govt-in-exile and the more than 70,000 Tibetan refugees in the country even after this Dalai Lama. Tibetan refugees also constitute one of the most successful examples of rehabilitation in modern history. At a time China has even stopped referring to Tibet by name – using the Chinese term 'Xizang' instead – it's India that has emerged as the cultural home of Tibetans.

**Strategic imperative** | Plus, India-China relations are at a major low. China has repeatedly intruded into and occupied Indian territory. Both armies are eyeball-to-eyeball in the higher Himalayas. India has stopped referring to the 'One China' policy for years. And since China doesn't see India as an equal and treats the border dispute as a convenient political tool, New Delhi should have no hesitation in backing the Tibetan cause. India needs leverage. And the Tibet issue is a big one.

# Summer sale

Both Britain and India could benefit from a special kind of FTA, a hot and cold exchange

Jug Suraiya

London, where I am, desperately needs a summer sale. Indeed, not just London, but the whole of Britain is hankering for someone to sell them what's urgently wanted, which is summer.

Britain's long winter of discontent, full of rain and gloom and more rain, is made glorious by the sun of the brief summer in which the country revels.

But this year, Britain found its summer's been cancelled. When I got to London end-May, the max temperature was 18°C, felt like 16°C, and was accompanied by arctic blasts of frigid air that chilled to the bone and beyond.

Since then, the mercury has barely managed to crawl up to a refrigerated 20°C, with overcast skies, melodramatic thunder and lightning, and blustery squalls of rain, as unpredictable as a spoilt brat's tantrums.

The media are full of the abscoding summer: Brrrrr-ittish Summer – where's it gone? laments a press headline. The Met Office wanly predicts a heatwave that has yet to materialise.

What's happened to Britain's summer? Climate change? Possibly. Or Brexit? Before that, Britain would get summer supplies of hot winds from Spain and other sunny spots, raising thermometer readings to 30°C and above.

Everyone would skip work, rush to the seaside, lie on the pebbled beach, get grilled like barbecued sausages, and suffer the itchy torment of sunburn. People would faint in the London Tube, and there'd be official exhortations to the public to carry copious quantities of drinking water, like sojourners crossing the Sahara.

Brexit put a break on European imports into Britain, which seems to include summer. So from where is Britain to get its quota of summer? Even as Britain shivers, much of India is sweltering in heatwaves, some reaching 50°C plus.

The FTA between India and Britain has been held up because Britain wants to export its products to India, and India wants to export its people to Britain, which the island nation doesn't want.

If India could export its excess warmth to Britain, and Britain export its surplus coolth to India, it would make for a great summer sale. Not climate change, but climate exchange.

# One Notion, Under Test

Centralising entrance tests was always going to be a challenge. But the experience with NTA's Big Four (JEE, NEET, CUET, UGC-NET) demands a return to the drawing board



S S Mantha

Entrance exams are make-or-break events for millions of young Indians. That's why what happened with NEET, and then UGC-NET, is nothing short of a public policy crisis.

Questions about NEET, the all-India pre-medical entrance test NTA conducted, still don't have good answers. So, the cancellation of UGC's NET a day after it was held, was a particularly nasty shock. More so, because CBI is now tasked with investigating "irregularities" that led to the cancellation. But we shouldn't be surprised. The flaws are built into the system.

Both tests were conducted by National Testing Agency (NTA), set up in 2017 to centralise entrance exams to higher education institutes. The goal was 'One Nation-One Test'. Yet, given the mixed experience every year with NTA's biggest exams: NEET, JEE, UGC-NET and central university entrance CUET, it is worth asking if that goal isn't misplaced.

**Absurd numbers** | Why have these tests thrown up more questions than answers? Within 48 hours of NEET results, four students took their own lives. That the results showed a phenomenal 67 students topping this year, while just 2-3 students did so in previous years, is only one aspect of the problem.

What beats logic is that these toppers were ranked basis their application number, rather than on measures of performance. Further, the number of students who scored 620-720 marks shot up compared to previous years.

So, if in 2023, a student with 700 marks had the rank of 294, in 2024 the rank is 1,770. Similarly, at 650 marks, the rank of 6,803 in 2023, in 2024, saw a three-fold fall – 21,724. At 600 marks, last year's 28,629 rank is 80,468 this year.

**Arbitrary actions** | Since some students had less time to complete the paper, NTA awarded them 'grace marks'. SC has since struck down the decision.

It has also ordered a retest for this set of students. But this raises its own questions. Can a retest be as rigorous as the original one? Will it not be unfair to both groups, students who attempt it and those who don't?

**Too sweeping** | There are plenty of incentives for manipulating exams such as UGC-NET and NEET. More than 24L students appeared for NEET this year, competing for just 55,648 seats in govt colleges, and 50,685 seats in private ones. UGC-NET determines eligibility for 'Assistant Professor' and 'Junior Research

Fellowship' in universities. It is held for 83 subjects in select cities twice every year. With so many competing for so few seats in a vast, poorly regulated exam system, crooked operators have many opportunities.

NTA was established as a specialist, autonomous body to replace a number of entrance tests for admission/fellowship to higher educational institutions. Yet, assessing candidates at the all-India level for admissions and recruitment was always going to be a challenge given the multiplicity of school boards and colleges, govt and private. Comparing individual performances or applying

research-based international standards requires far more rigour than simply conducting a centralised test.

The sheer numbers to whom the tests must be administered makes ensuring efficiency, transparency, and error-free delivery a giant task.

**Retest no solution** | What is the way out? Is conducting retests the answer once irregularities come to light? Not in the case of NEET at least. For it denies both the 1,500-odd students who will take the retest on June 23 and the rest of the examinees a level-playing field. A retest for all examinees is also problematic because they would have to take it at short notice, as against preparation of at least three to four years for regular exams.

NTA needs structural reforms. Conducting fair entrance exams for professional courses is a challenge that requires a multi-faceted approach. NTA must ensure use of secure exam design and technology that includes Computer-Based Testing (CBT), randomised questions, and adaptive testing techniques where a question is based on the earlier answer, making it difficult to share answers. Even item pooling, where questions are drawn from a large pool, making it unlikely that any two test-takers will have the same set of questions, is an interesting option.

**Let tech help** | Technology must be leveraged massively. Proctoring and monitoring that includes live proctoring, AI-based proctoring and screen monitoring must become the norm. Securing the exam environment is key. If there are Optical Mark Recognition (OMR)-based exams, securing printing and transportation with tamper-evident seals is vital. It's the regulations and penalties in place that lend credibility to the exercise.

Post-exam analysis is the most critical aspect of any exam. Data forensics and score validation using statistical methods to validate scores and identify anomalies are essential. Best practices of globally administered tests such as GRE/TOEFL could also be adopted.

**Decentralise exams** | Govt needs to be sensitive to students' efforts and ensure NTA's credibility is restored. Given India's demographic diversity, fair testing for students speaking different languages and from different socio-economic backgrounds is of paramount importance.

One Nation-One Test may be good as a concept, but its implementation must be seen to be fair. To that end, all options, including decentralising the exams, need to be explored. Research says too much centralisation could be breeding irregularities.

The writer is former chairman, AICTE

# 'Angry Europeans are voting for right-wing parties... migration's out of favour...Le Pen can be France's president'

Recent EU elections saw far-right parties increase their tally in the continental Parliament. This may see a prominence of right-wing agenda in European policy-making. Michael von der Schulenburg, former assistant secretary-general at UN, spoke with Rudroneel Ghosh about the implications:

- **With EU election results showing gains for the far-right, will EU policy too track rightward now?**  
The new EU Parliament will move to the right, but we cannot speak of a landslide in favour of far-right parties. True, there will be some significant shifts in its composition – far-right parties having gained while the Greens in particular have lost ground. But the Parliament will continue to be dominated by the three mainstream party formations, the conservatives, social democrats and liberals. It is therefore unlikely that anything will change at the top of European Commission. Von der Leyen may once again become President of EU Commission and the two other important posts, that of EU Council president and EU foreign affairs commissioner, may be occupied by the social democratic and liberal camps again.
- **What are the political effects of these elections?**  
The political impact of EU elections is more likely to be felt at national levels, in particular in the three largest European economies, France, Germany and Italy. In France, President Macron got only 14% of the votes, and it can no longer be ruled out that the next president of France could be Le Pen from the right-wing Rassemblement National party.  
Chancellor Scholz in Germany fared even worse with just 13% of the votes and his coalition govt is in tatters, while the far-right AfD became the second strongest force in Germany. In Italy, PM Meloni and her party with its pro-fascist roots were able to consolidate power. There are also several European countries in which right-wing parties have already taken over govt or are about to do so, such as in Netherlands, Austria and Spain.
- **What drove so many EU voters to the right?**  
There is great dissatisfaction and fear for the future among European populations, especially among the low- and middle-income classes. They fear for their social benefits, their pensions, internal security. They see more and more money being spent on armaments
- **Will we see a hardening of immigration policies?**  
Yes, the trend is towards hardening. This is only partly a success for right-wing parties. Almost all political parties are now calling for restrictions on migration. The only difference is the extent to which such measures should be implemented. They are responding to a significant change in public opinion, even among Europeans with migration backgrounds.
- **What are the challenges going forward?**  
First, there is the question of what kind of European community we want: a union of largely independent member states or a union as a potential superpower similar to US. Opinions differ widely here. There is also the question of an enlargement of EU and whether this would make EU ungovernable and further undermine support for it among the population. A particular problem here is Ukraine's political aspiration to join EU. The financial consequences of such a decision could lead EU to ruin.  
The second question is how to deal with the war in Ukraine. This is becoming an urgent and divisive question now as US is seen to be increasingly withdrawing from the Ukraine war. This has led to dangerous panic positions of European politicians towards Russia. But EU actually cannot afford a war in Ukraine with Russia and will either have to negotiate or lose out.  
The third question would be what an independent foreign and security policy could look like if the Transatlantic alliance breaks as a result of Trump's possible election as next US president. I don't think there is an answer to that. A Europe, consisting of 27 small- and medium-sized states, could fall apart over this issue.



Calvin & Hobbes

IT WILL BE CALLED "THE TRIUMPH OF PERSEVERANCE."

VERY INSPIRING. WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE?

THIS.

YOU'RE THROUGH?

I'M BORED.

© 1985 Watterson/Distributed by Universal Uclick

2-20 WREAN

# Yog Is Mindful Movement, A Journey Of Self-Discovery

KV Raghupathi

Two cardinal principles in the dynamic spiritual science of yoga are movement and awareness. Both are not separate entities; they coexist and complement each other. The first principle in yoga is movement in balance with awareness. Life is a movement, not a stagnant pool. It is like riding a bicycle. To maintain balance, one must keep pedalling without tilting and falling on either side.

The body acquires sickness if it remains in one place. Movement, both vertical and horizontal is, therefore, necessary to prevent the build-up of harmful substances that will cause disease within the body. The only way we could live a lifetime of fluid and painless mobility would be to acknowledge that we are more than just a skeleton with moving components. Humans are made of layers upon layers of connective

tissues that move and eventually develop patterns of movement based on our ingrained behaviours and programming.

In Hath Yoga, the asan and pranayam facilitate greater movement, triggering enhanced awareness. Asanas stimulate internal organs such as the muscles, bones, and cells, whereas other forms of physical exercise activate the external parts of the body. Through asanas, the toxic elements accumulated in the cells are burnt. The blood is purified, new energy is infused, and fresh oxygen is injected. We must love how our bones and muscles move through space and time: flexing, stretching, bending, twisting, pivoting, turning, reaching, folding – the list of amazing and enjoyable actions that are effective and effortless is endless.

To assist us in moving freely, a functional movement approach to asan prac-

tice that helps us logically, imaginatively, and methodically can strengthen and stretch, stabilise and mobilise, unwind and unbind. Motions derived from situational biomechanics in the actual world are called functional motions. We frequently move in just one or two planes when we work, play, and sleep, usually in the forward flexion region of the sagittal plane and sometimes in one direction of the transverse plane, which taxes the body's core muscles. Asans strengthen, stabilise, and mobilise all three planes of movement: the sagittal flexion and extension, coronal abduction and adduction, and transverse rotation.

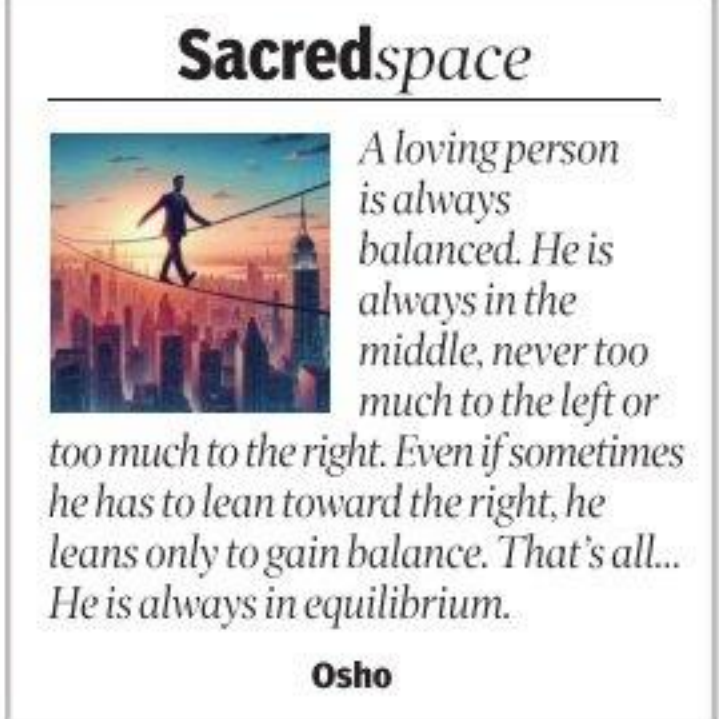
The purpose of pranayam is to cleanse the subtle nerve centres and manipulate the pranic currents to bring about change in consciousness. Its triple benefits include eliminating the grossness of subtler bodies, preparing the mind for dharana

and dhyana, and destroying the accumulated subliminal impressions. Through pranayam, the mind becomes like clarified butter. It acquires the capacity to perceive mental images without confusion.

The second principle is awareness in movement. One's awareness is subsequently strengthened when the movement of the body and the mind is triggered. This awareness is not momentary but moment-to-moment. It is the awareness of the body, the thought process, and the environment.

Both asan and pranayam activate the inner and outer movement of the body with more awareness, which in turn facilitates more movement. This transformative process of movement and awareness, perfectly synchronised, not only brings balance within ourselves but also with the outer environment. All movement in awareness and awareness in movement happen to achieve a state of calmness. This is the essence of yoga.

June 21 is International Day of Yoga



Sacredspace

A loving person is always balanced. He is always in the middle, never too much to the left or too much to the right. Even if sometimes he has to lean toward the right, he leans only to gain balance. That's all... He is always in equilibrium.

Osho



# The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Pariksha pe charcha

UGC-NET cancellation a huge letdown

THE cancellation of the University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) examination a day after it was conducted comes as a huge embarrassment for the Centre and a big letdown for the over nine lakh candidates. The shock cancellation has been attributed to inputs that the integrity of the examination may have been compromised. One reason for the swift action could be to avoid a repeat of the raging controversy over the alleged irregularities in the NEETUG examination. After this, a sense of betrayal in the public consciousness is inevitable. After the twin botch-ups in quick succession, the National Testing Agency (NTA) finds itself in a worsening crisis of credibility. The Central Bureau of Investigation has been tasked with conducting the probe. This reflects the seriousness being attached to the matter; but the damage has already been done.

The NTA has been holding the UGC-NET examination in a computer-based format since 2018. It had gone back to the pen-and-paper version this year. The Education Minister has spoken of setting up a high-level committee to recommend an overhaul of the examination processes. Wide-ranging discussions among domain experts — ‘pariksha pe charcha’ in its true sense — would be expected. Unilateral imposition of new guidelines and patterns may not be a pragmatic solution when faced with a trust deficit.

Conducted twice a year, UGC-NET is the first such examination to be scrapped after the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act was passed in February. This law provides for three to five years in prison and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh for resorting to unfair means. It will take time to gauge how effective the legislation proves to be as a deterrent. Cancellation can take a heavy toll on the mental and emotional wellbeing of candidates. A zero-error system has to be the end goal.

## ‘Honour’ killing

Societal change a work in progress in Haryana

THE chilling murders of Saravjeet Kaur in Sirsa and Komal Rani in Kaithal show that Haryana is rightly synonymous with ‘honour’ killing. In the Saravjeet case, her family initially tried to fool everyone into believing that she had died of a heart attack. Later, her father and brother confessed to the police that they had strangled her over a relationship they disapproved of. Saravjeet’s family objected to the affair because of her lover’s poor economic condition. The root cause of the Kaithal episode, in which a 17-year-old boy allegedly murdered his sister, was the family’s opposition to her inter-caste marriage.

It’s a paradox that a state renowned for its women sportspersons, particularly wrestlers, continues to face ignominy over gender injustice and inequality. Befittingly, it was in Haryana that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had launched the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao programme in January 2015. This initiative was primarily aimed at improving the child sex ratio and spurring women’s empowerment. Though Haryana has crossed the mark of 900 in the sex ratio at birth, the long-term goal of achieving societal change remains largely elusive. A deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset is adversely impacting the lives of Haryana’s girls, especially in rural areas.

Around nine years ago, Sunil Jaglan, then sarpanch of Haryana’s Bibipur village, had started the ‘Selfie With Daughter’ campaign, for which he was lauded by PM Modi. The trend became popular not only in India but abroad too, with countless parents telling the world how proud they were of their daughters. Such initiatives which involve the entire community can go a long way in bringing about a mindset change. These should be a regular feature instead of a one-off thing. Haryana’s girls have been winning laurels for the country in the international arena; the state cannot afford to let itself be dishonoured by people with a regressive attitude.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

# The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JUNE 21, 1924

## Judge McCardie's case

IN dealing with the very important motion of which Mr Lansbury has given notice in the House of Commons, urging that a humble address be presented to His Majesty, praying him to cause the removal of Mr Justice McCardie from the Bench on the ground that he is unfit to carry out judicial duties, it is necessary to remember that it was a Liberal newspaper which first made this proposal. In an article which has been summarised in a special cable published by one of our Bombay contemporaries, this influential Liberal journal suggested that the Judge should be removed from the Bench by a vote of the two Houses of Parliament. This origin of the proposal is very important, because it can only mean that if the resolution is actually moved, as we trust it will be, it will have not only Labour but also Liberal support. Of course, it is extremely improbable that even then it will be carried in the House of Commons, while in the House of Lords, from whose action in the case of Gen Dyer the Judge himself appears to have taken his cue, it is sure to be thrown out by a large majority. It cannot be forgotten that in both Houses, the Conservatives are still the largest single party, and so long as this condition of things lasts, there is not the ghost of a chance of so drastic a step as that proposed by Mr. Lansbury being carried out, for the simple reason that the Government and its supporters are not likely to attach that serious importance to the matter, by which alone they could hope to outvote the Conservatives in the Lower House and coerce them in the Upper.

# OPINION

## Service before self makes a difference

Officers with integrity, competence and dedication to the job at hand can work wonders



TRYSTS AND TURNS

JULIO RIBEIRO

OUR Prime Minister, who is easily the most popular individual in the country even after the setback his party suffered in the Lok Sabha elections, often advocates a positive approach to men and matters. In this article, I shall attempt to do just that.

Before the elections were announced, a serving member of the IPS, Haryana DGP Shatrueet Kapur, sent me the manuscript of his book. He wanted me to read it and send my comments, part of which he intended to use in the blurb of the yet-to-be-published book, titled *Wired for Success*. But the book is not about his experiences in the police but about his three-year stint as the Chairman and Managing Director of two Haryana power distribution companies, a job traditionally handled by IAS officers.

There are numerous lessons in the book for those in high offices in the administration and the police. I dare say that the corporate world would also benefit since management principles were fully in play during Shatrueet’s tenure.

He is a product of the IIT, like many IAS and IPS officers in the past few decades. He was identified by a discerning Chief Minister as a man of integrity, competence and dedication to the job at hand. There are many such men and women in the IAS and the IPS, but politicians whose only goal is power often overlook them for more ‘committed’ officers who are willing to help them further their political careers, something that Sar-



EXEMPLARY: Haryana DGP Shatrueet Kapur spearheaded a turnaround in the fortunes of the state’s power distribution companies. PM

dar Patel had warned against.

Officers with a conscience should not lose heart when they are overlooked for crucial appointments and preference is given to ‘committed’ officers. A time comes when sycophancy does not work. Those in power then go looking for the honest and the competent to sort out the mess. Then those whose commitment is not to their political masters but to the people at large are in demand.

I was delighted to learn from Shatrueet’s book that then Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar had put the people’s interests above his own. PM Narendra Modi has included him in the Union Cabinet. This is a wise choice.

Both power distribution companies had been reporting massive financial losses year after year. The debts incurred by them had hit the roof, forcing the state Finance Minister to “tear out his hair” and the people to bear larger tariff costs, irregular electric supply and frequent breakdowns.

The IAS fraternity was not happy when the job was entrusted to an IPS colleague. They demonstrated their displeasure in myriad ways,

The IAS fraternity was not happy when the job was entrusted to an IPS colleague. They demonstrated their displeasure in myriad ways, but the CM stood firm.

which are listed in the book, but the CM stood firm. Rivalry and jealousy are normal human failings. Wise officers should shun such feelings and tendencies. Politicians take advantage of officers’ rivalries to perpetuate their hold on power. The people, for whose betterment both politicians

and government officials are supposed to work, do not care to know who is senior to whom. They are interested in work being done. They instinctively know which officer is working for their welfare and who is working to satisfy his own ego or, more often, for his financial prosperity.

When he took over the reins of the discoms, Shatrueet met his entire staff, including workers on the ground, during his tours. He clearly spelt out his priorities and methods to achieve goals to each of them. He listened to those who offered sage advice, their ranks notwithstanding. He took over the entire gamut of promotions and transfers, the main cause of dissatisfaction in all government services. Those who performed and met goals were rewarded with cutting-edge postings that mattered. A whole army of favoured ones reveling in political or other patronage, who managed their postings as a matter of entitlement, were left out in the cold.

The principles of participative management and just and impartial treatment in the matter of rewards and punishments got every employee, big or

small, on board. They began working as a team, a goal which all good leaders strive for.

It was clear to me that the two discoms were turned round from loss-making to profit-making companies because of the quality of leadership introduced into managing them by Shatrueet. I felt a surge of pride that a serving member of my tribe had succeeded where the marginally more brainy lot had failed. Personal integrity and a solid value system proved crucial for success.

The job of heading these discoms was given back to the government’s senior service after Shatrueet’s promotion and appointment as the DGP. There is no reason for his successors to fail where he had succeeded. They have only to keep in mind that their job is to provide services to the people, that they are servants of the people and not their masters. It is sad to find today many more officers claiming entitlement!

The principal requirement for a successful leader is that he or she should lead by example. If the leader preaches honesty and integrity to his juniors but does exactly the opposite himself, that is his first fatal flaw. Juniors will never follow him, however much he tries to bully or cajole them. Shatrueet led by example. His book will tell you more about how he went about his work. It will benefit those who joined the services to work for the country and its people.

Finally, do read what RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had to say about the BJP’s descent to 240 seats in the Lok Sabha. Consign egos to the fire, he said. Though these were not his exact words, this is obviously what he meant.

I kept to my promise of positivity when talking of Shatrueet. It should help to encourage the straightforward. I am sorry about introducing negativity at the very last stage. But negativity can also help at times.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No man will make a great leader who wants to do it all himself or get all the credit for doing it. — Andrew Carnegie

## Popularising yoga in Japan

BK GOSWAMI

YOGA has still not conquered Japan in the way it has some of the Western world. Among its followers in Japan, it is not known so much as yoga, but by its Japanese name, Shin-shin-toitsu-do (unification of the mind and body). Other names are Okido Yoga and Meridian Yoga.

Yoga’s Japanese version began in the 1900s when a martial artist, Nakamura Tempu, introduced it. This mixture of Indian and Japanese traditions focuses on establishing a strong mind-body connection. But yoga remained a relatively exotic practice for most of the last century. And it might have languished in a ‘yes, it is there’ status but for a woman called Minako Kuno.

It was sheer chance that she came into contact with yoga guru BKS Iyengar. A medical practitioner, Kuno was clinical in her appraisal of the science called yoga. As Iyengar’s methodical explanations appealed to her trained mind, she became a committed convert to yoga. This happened in the early 1980s. Since then, she has visited India more than 50 times. Every time she visits this country, she brings along other Japanese enthusiasts. They are mostly professionals in their fields. But there are also men and women who could be your next-door neighbours. This eclectic group has one unifying force — Kuno, or rather, Madam Kuno, as they respectfully call this woman who is getting on in years but is still sprightly. And they are all committed to yoga.

While yoga is her life’s driving mission, she has found other acts of faith as well. Her devotion to Mother Teresa began when she first visited Calcutta and met her. After that, she would find one reason or the other to include Calcutta in almost every trip to India so that she could meet her. The last time she came to Calcutta was in 1997 to attend Mother Teresa’s funeral. She continues to organise photographic exhibitions on the life and activities of the icon in cities in Japan.

Kuno’s links with India have grown over the years. The basic motivation is the love for yoga, but it is also to introduce the Japanese people to the many splendours of India, especially those with a Buddhist heritage. Her love for India is all-embracing, and it includes the marginalised and the poor. That’s why her itinerary includes visits to orphanages and schools for children with special needs. It is in recognition of her outstanding social service that Kuno was conferred an award by the wife of then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2017.

After a lifetime of promoting India-Japan links through yoga and charitable activities, Kuno remains an incredible testimony to the power of yoga. She still has the energy of people decades younger to her, and a passion for yoga that remains undiminished. That’s why you can still see her busily conducting classes every morning at one of her yoga centres in Japan.

Thanks to her work, yoga is no longer an unfamiliar name in Japan. Instead, it brings forth a warm smile.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Fraying India-Canada ties

The commemoration of Hardeep Singh Nijjar’s death has cast a shadow over India-Canada relations. The Canadian Parliament’s moment of silence in honour of Nijjar underscores the gravity of the situation. However, it is Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s handling of the Nijjar case that raises serious concerns. His claim that Indian government agents were allegedly involved in Nijjar’s killing has strained bilateral ties. New Delhi’s demand for concrete evidence of an ‘Indian hand’ remains unaddressed, even as the Canadian police have apprehended four Indian nationals in connection with the crime. India’s Consulate General in Vancouver has unequivocally asserted its commitment to countering terrorism. The message to Canada is clear: pro-Khalistan elements must not find a platform to target India.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

## Break the nexus

Refer to the editorial ‘Drug crackdown’: it is encouraging to see the Punjab CM take the drug menace plaguing the state seriously. But mass transfers of low-ranking police officials may not be enough to stem the rot. The need of the hour is to improve coordination between the state police, members of civil society and Central agencies. Joint efforts can help tackle the menace, which has spread its tentacles across the length and breadth of the country. A coordinated national response is a must. The cross-border supply of narcotics needs to be reined in. Besides breaking the nexus between drug operatives and law enforcement officials, it is necessary to ensure that those involved receive stringent punishment.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

## Personnel rejig not enough

The transfer of nearly 10,000 Punjab Police personnel has been hailed as a bold move in the fight against the drug mafia. However, it is time to recognise that mere personnel reshuffling won’t suffice. We stand at a crossroads where deeper introspection is needed. The nexus between drug peddlers and the police

remains intact despite the crackdown. The Chief Minister’s stern warnings are necessary, but they alone won’t dismantle this unholy alliance. The recent spate of drug overdose deaths underscores the urgency of the situation. The civil society’s role, too, has been lacklustre. We must bridge the gap between policy planning and community engagement. Attitudinal shifts among our officers are crucial. The fight against drugs transcends Punjab — it is a national crisis. It is time for political parties to rise above blame games and seek solutions to the menace together.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, BY MAIL

## Political will a must for change

Refer to the editorial ‘Drug crackdown’: the growing menace assumes greater proportions because of the nexus between peddlers and cops. Police officials who are hand in glove with the operatives also receive proceeds from the sale of drugs. Political will is a must to overhaul the system. Governing a state like Punjab demands a certain level of seriousness and commitment on the part of the political establishment and the ruling dispensation. Besides, it is important to ensure that the issue of drug abuse is not unnecessarily politicised.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

## Farm loan waivers of no help

Apropos of the article ‘Inequality, joblessness a drag on India’s economic growth’: concrete steps need to be taken to improve the quality of treatment and education being provided at government-run hospitals and schools, respectively. A range of measures have been proposed to address income and wealth inequalities, but none has been properly implemented. Further, farm loan waivers are not a solution for improving agricultural incomes and reducing inequality. Besides, there is a need to deliberate on the potential benefits of the three contentious (since repealed) farm laws introduced by the Modi government for the agriculture sector. The growth of food processing clusters in rural areas would have created a variety of jobs with different skill requirements.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR



# China's moves Down Under have strategic lessons



**GURJIT SINGH**  
FORMER AMBASSADOR

**E**VEN as a US Congressional delegation has riled China by meeting the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, Australia and New Zealand are engaging with Beijing on the trade front. Chinese Premier Li Qiang visited New Zealand last week and Australia earlier this week. Then Premier Li Keqiang had toured Australia in 2017. The prospect of Australia's re-engagement with China has been evident since 2022, when the Labour government was re-elected. PM Anthony Albanese visited Beijing in November last year to unfreeze the relationship. Evidently, China's economic strictures were hurting Australia.

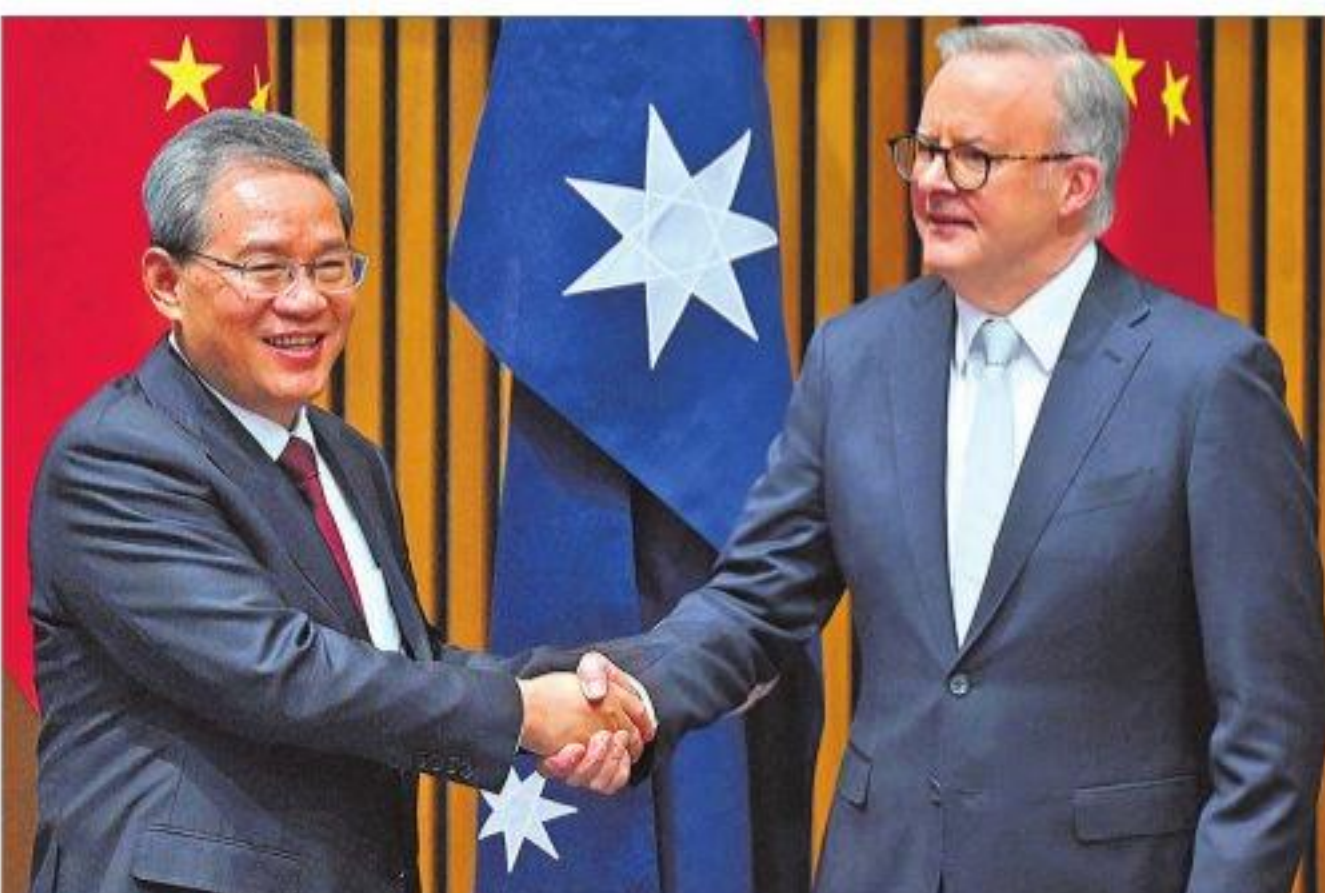
China had taken umbrage at Australia seeking an inquiry into the origin of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, Australia adopted a more strategic approach to China, expressing concern over covert foreign interference in Australian politics, excluding Chinese telecommunications companies like Huawei from the 5G network and the recent clashes between naval ships in the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea.

With New Zealand, the strategic concerns are less direct. Both Australia and New Zealand feel the heat of the Chinese challenge in the South Pacific.

During Li Qiang's visit, both countries sought to manage their differences with China, revive economic ties and draw benefits from more trade and investment while nudging compliance with their strategic priorities.

New Zealand was the first Western country to have a free trade agreement with China since 2008. It was the first to recognise China as a market economy and sign an agreement under the Belt and Road Initiative. China is its largest export destination for milk and agricultural products. New Zealand has a bilateral trade of \$23 billion which, though not large, is significant for it. The Australia-China trade is to the tune of \$216 billion. Australia, China and New Zealand are all part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. And now, China is wooing them to enter into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

New Zealand PM Christopher Luxon aims to balance the relationship from a focus on economic opportunity to greater resilience and de-risking. New Zealand is painfully aware of cyberattacks on its Parliament website, but it cannot ignore its essential focus on trade. Since January this year, New Zealand dairy products have entered China free of



**OUTREACH:** Chinese Premier Li Qiang (left) with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese during a signing ceremony in Canberra on June 17. REUTERS

duties and quotas.

New Zealand also benefits from the footfall of Chinese tourists. In April this year, 10 per cent of the 2,25,000 tourists in New Zealand were Chinese, ranking second behind those from the neighbouring Australia, which saw 535,000 Chinese tourists in 2023. China, in a classic case of 'relaxed coercion' diplomacy, promises to include New Zealand among the countries for which visa exemptions would be granted. In return, New Zealand would be more flexible in granting visas for the Chinese.

Australia is by far the bigger catch for China, which has been its single largest trading partner for both exports and imports since 2009. In 2023, their trade increased by 4 per

It is the competition for Australia's rare earths, which are important for electric vehicles and renewable energy, which draws the most Chinese interest.

cent. Australian investment in China grew by 11.7 per cent over 2022. The number of Australian companies in China has increased by 40 per cent. In April, Australia concluded its anti-dumping measures against Chinese windmill towers after it lost its case in the World Trade Organisation against Chinese steel products. China reduced its anti-dumping measures on Australian wine and barley and lifted restrictions on many Australian exporters of beef and lamb.

Australian analysts struggle to justify this, saying, "How do you cut off your biggest customer? Will Australian friends make up for the lost income and investment?" Australia China Business Council president David Olsson expects

China's ban on Australian seafood to be lifted as well and hopes for better mutual grant of visas. In return, China wants its foreign direct investment in Australia to face lesser scrutiny.

Australia is China's top supplier of iron ore. But it is the competition for Australia's rare earths, which are important for electric vehicles and renewable energy, which draws the most Chinese interest.

China already has investments in lithium factories in Australia, but subsequent efforts have been thwarted as Australia took a more strategic view.

At present, critical minerals and rare earths are the focus of the new great game, and everybody is seeking these from known sources. Some African countries have got significant Chinese, and now Korean, interest. Australia, a Quad member, should be working with the US, Japan and India for greater collaboration on this front. The idea that Japanese technology, Australian rare earths and Indian manufacturing could come together under a Quad initiative facilitated by the India-Australia-Japan Supply Chain Resilience Initiative is attractive but nascent.

With Australia's rare earths at the core, the prospect of engaging it more robustly by non-Chinese partners emerges from Canberra's more determined partnership with Quad. It was also pushed by the Chinese trade restrictions, which

were curtailing Australian economic activity.

When India and Australia signed the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement in 2022, it was evidently a strategic effort to create complementarities. What will happen to these slow efforts, given the revival of Australia's China trade and economic partnership? At the time of Quad 1.0, it was the Australian turn about on China that slowed down Quad. What about Quad 2.0? Will Australian interest in it diminish?

Australian statements seem to indicate that they know what they are doing. They are cognisant of their responsibilities to the Quad and AUKUS (the alliance between Australia, UK and US), which will augment their nuclear submarine capacity, whose target is the Chinese.

The Aussie-Kiwi tie-up with China does not draw strategic lessons from what China is doing in the East Asia Sea with Japan, in the South China Sea (particularly with the Philippines), and with India in the Indian Ocean Region.

The trade-first approach of Australia, therefore, needs cautious understanding. While India is aware that since the Covid-19 pandemic, all its Quad partners and ASEAN have all done record-breaking trade with China, it is Beijing's diplomatic manoeuvring to reduce economic pressures on individual partners that should worry the others.

## The many lows of India's higher education system



**M RAJIVLOCHAN**  
HISTORIAN

**T**ODAY, a college/university degree is a primary requirement for most well-paying professions. Some might even say that a degree is also good for one's izzat (honour), much like a permanent *sarkari naukri*. Little wonder that anyone with a modicum of desire and opportunity makes an effort to get a degree.

Yet, in India, despite so many young ones eager to acquire a degree and willing to pay for it, we have neither been able to create infrastructure to educate them nor succeeded in ensuring that the existing infrastructure has quality.

All that we have been able to do successfully is to increase the stress on young Indians by subjecting them to unnecessary and seemingly unfair screening tests of the sort that the National Testing Agency is currently administering. The only object of those tests is to

reject aspirants who have already been tested by a school board or a university.

Often, students going abroad is linked to the lack of job opportunities in India. That would be a misunderstanding of the problem. The malady is deep-rooted.

Few realise that Indians spend six to nine times the size of the Union Budget on higher education to study abroad. At the last count, the Ministry of External Affairs reported that there were over 1.5 million Indians studying abroad. With each of them spending at least Rs 20 lakh annually on tuition fee and living expenses, the total money taken out of India merely to study abroad each year amounts to at least Rs 3 lakh crore. It could be as high as Rs 4.5 lakh crore if we make a more realistic estimate of what these students actually spend. In contrast, the allocation for higher education in the Interim Budget of 2024-25 was Rs 47,619.77 crore.

This is a drain of wealth which we have allowed by creating a mishapen system of higher education. Even this system yields considerable results for those who stick to it. Even this bit of higher education that is imparted in India leads to a considerable jump in the earning capacity for those



**IN VAIN:** Essentially, a degree from India is useless outside the country. ISTOCK

who partake of it. So much so that despite not earning anything while studying, those with educational qualifications earn far more over a lifetime than those without.

Using the Periodic Labour Force Survey data for 2022-23, it is estimated that the cumulative earnings of a person who invests four years in college education after completing higher secondary education would be more than that of someone who was merely HSC (higher secondary certificate)-qualified, by the ninth year. This would translate into something as follows: overall, a graduate

The absence of knowledge creation seems to be having a cascading effect across the entire realm of education in India.

earns over Rs 26 lakh more in a lifetime as compared to someone whose highest qualification was higher secondary; for the postgraduate, it turns out that earnings over a lifetime would be more than Rs 54 lakh as compared to someone with HSC as the highest qualification; for a PhD holder, this difference is even greater at Rs 69 lakh over a lifetime.

However, and this is an interesting bit of detail that has often been ignored, even this educational qualification is not sufficient for Indians to get a job abroad. It may get them a visa for fur-

ther studies in Canada, the US, UK or Australia — the four preferred destinations for Indian youth — but not a job. For that, they have to invest anything from Rs 20 lakh to Rs 40 lakh per annum for at least two years.

Essentially, a degree from India is useless outside the country. Most Indian institutions, too, do not consider these degrees of any value beyond a basic minimum. Indians with degrees have to undertake fresh entrance examinations for entry to a higher level of education or for a job. Recruiters across the job market complain that a degree in India is not a guarantor of relevant knowledge any more.

Worse still, even in the realm of creating new knowledge, the Indian higher education sector is lacking considerably.

Please do not confuse knowledge generation with the number of PhDs or the number of books and scientific papers being published. Look at the reception of research in Indian higher education institutions in the world of knowledge.

The Times Higher Education Rankings is one of the hundred-odd ranking systems that have emerged in the past two decades. One of the metrics that it reports is 'research quality'. This

includes a combination of citation impact, research strength, research excellence and research influence examined over the past five years. On this metric, the top 50 universities of the world have a score of 90-plus.

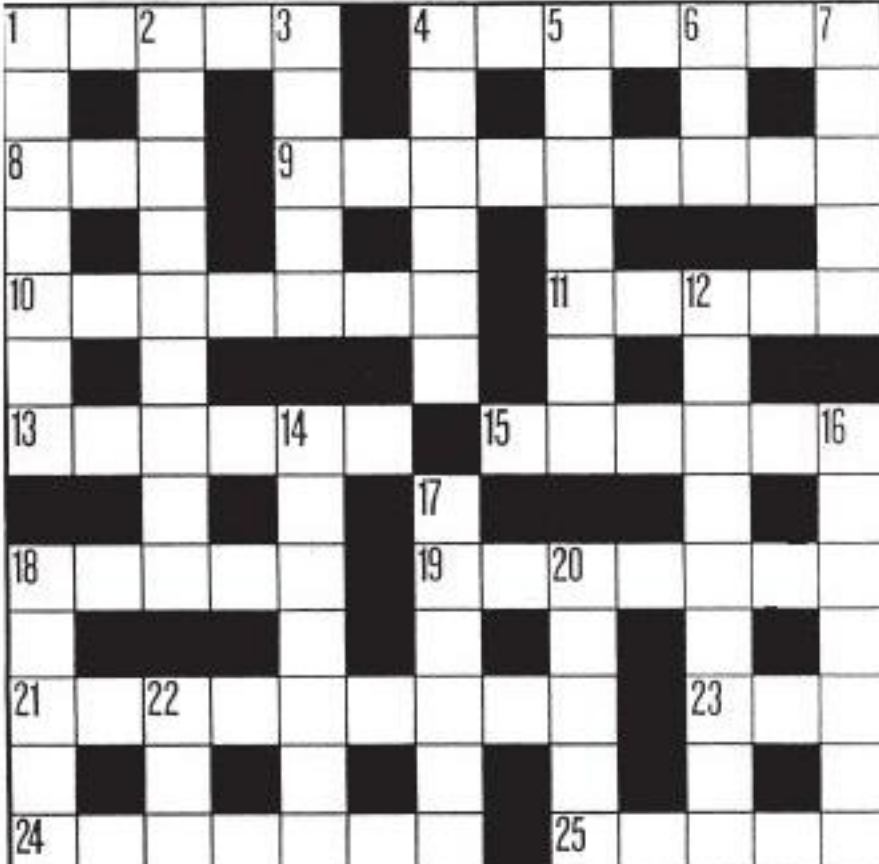
Among the institutions of higher education in India, only the IISc (Indian Institute of Science) features in this decile with a score of 96. This is a small institution with less than 10,000 students.

The next set of institutions, including Jamia Millia Islamia, IIT Patna, IIT Hyderabad, Jamia Hamdard, NIT Silchar, Delhi Technological University and Anna University — have scores in the 70s. After these come Panjab University (67.9), Mahatma Gandhi University (62.3), Alagappa University (64.8), Aligarh Muslim University (61.6) and Banaras Hindu University (66.4).

Jawaharlal Nehru University, which is presumed to be among the top universities of the country, scored a dismal 51.4, while Manipal University, one of the few private universities to feature in the rankings, has a score of 46. Other universities of India have far worse scores.

The absence of knowledge creation seems to be having a cascading effect across the entire realm of education in India.

QUICK CROSSWORD

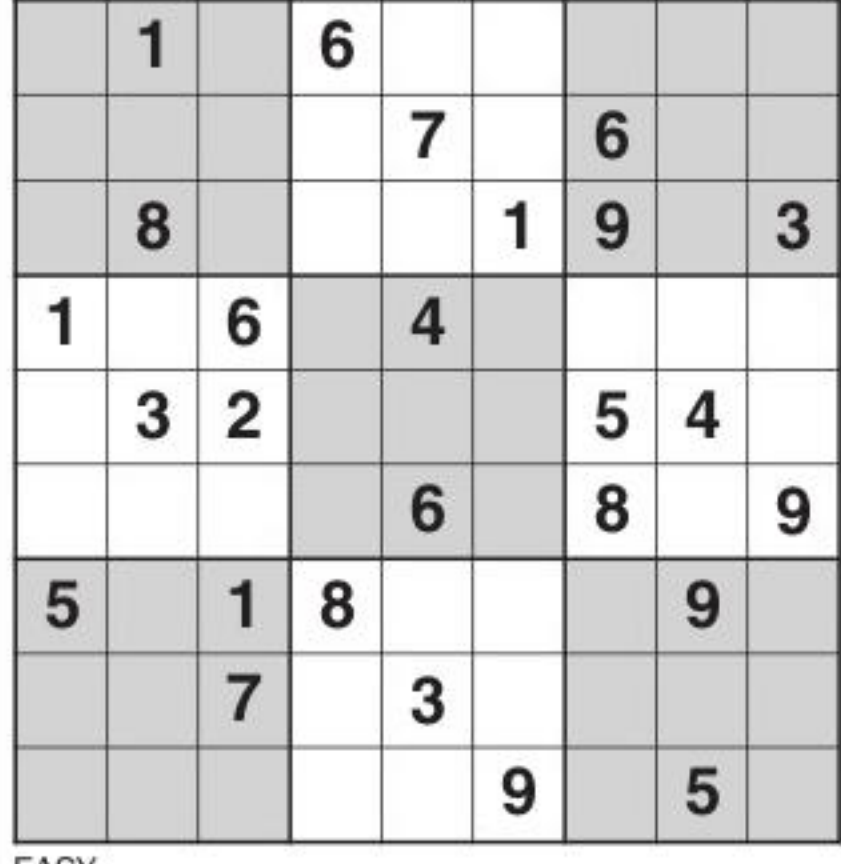


**ACROSS**  
1 A light parody (5)  
4 Withdraw from competition (7)  
8 Monotonous routine (3)  
9 Impudent (9)  
10 A lustrous smooth fabric (7)  
11 Group's characteristic spirit (5)  
13 Rich pastureland (6)  
15 Injure by overuse (6)  
18 Military chaplain (5)  
19 Tree-living American marsupial (7)  
21 On the ground (9)  
23 Nickname of US president, d.1865 (3)  
24 Power (7)  
25 Jottings (5)

**DOWN**  
1 A layer (7)  
2 In peremptory manner (3,2,4)  
3 Natural or synthetic filament (5)  
4 Story in instalments (6)  
5 To mirror (7)  
6 Nervous twitching (3)  
7 Ancient Greek abode of dead (5)  
12 Initial competitive advantage (4,5)  
14 Exceed fixed time (7)  
16 Figures in the Old Testament (7)  
17 Group of settlers (6)  
18 Flop down (5)  
20 On many occasions (5)  
22 Small spot (3)

**Yesterday's solution**  
**Across:** 1 Second best, 8 Nerve, 9 Stamina, 10 Wreath, 11 Until, 12 Notify, 14 Revert, 17 Trait, 19 Applied, 21 Exploit, 22 Array, 23 Lose no time.  
**Down:** 2 Eamest, 3 Overt, 4 Dispel, 5 Enasure, 6 Twist, 7 Call it a day, 8 Now and then, 13 Fatuous, 15 Epigram, 16 Wanton, 18 Appal, 20 Plant.

SU DO KU



**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

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

**CALENDAR**  
JUNE 21, 2024, FRIDAY  
■ Shaka Samvat 1946  
■ Jyeshtha Shaka 31  
■ Aashadh Purnashtami 8  
■ Hijri 1445  
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 14, up to 7.32 am  
■ Shubh Yoga up to 6.42 pm  
■ Jyeshtha Nakshatra up to 6.19 pm  
■ Moon enters Sagittarius sign 6.19 pm

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	19:27 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	05:22 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	41	27
New Delhi	40	29
Amritsar	40	27
Bathinda	41	25
Jalandhar	40	27
Ludhiana	41	27
Bhiwani	42	28
Hisar	41	27
Sirsa	42	28
Dharamsala	36	16
Manali	27	12
Shimla	26	13
Srinagar	28	14
Jammu	40	25
Kargil	21	14
Leh	22	11
Dehradun	33	21
Mussoorie	22	13

TEMPERATURE IN °C



# Pacifying farmers

Cabinet approves MSP for 14 Kharif season crops amid rising farmer unrest, but is it enough?

In one of its first major decisions, the Modi Government has decided to assuage the farmers by increasing the Minimum Support Price (MSP). The Union Cabinet has approved the MSP for 14 Kharif season crops. This decision reflects the Government's attempt to ensure that farmers receive fair and remunerative prices for their produce, thereby helping them cope with rising input costs and inflation. Whether the farmers would welcome it, is doubtful. But it would indeed be some relief for the farmers. The approved MSP rates for Kharif crops indicate a substantial increase over the previous year. For instance, the MSP for paddy, the staple Kharif crop, has been raised by Rs100 per quintal, setting the new price at Rs 2,180 for the common variety and Rs 2,200 for the Grade A variety. Similarly, the MSP for maize has been increased by Rs 75 per quintal to Rs 2,130. These adjustments are part of a broader effort to cover a range of crops including cereals like rice and maize, pulses such as moong and tur and oilseeds like soybeans and groundnuts.



The recent surge in farmer protests underscores the presence of deeper systemic issues that extend beyond mere price support. High input costs, inadequate procurement infrastructure, mounting debt and the impacts of climate change are among the key factors driving farmer dissatisfaction. Many farmers struggle to access the benefits of the MSP due to insufficient procurement mechanisms and delays in payments. Moreover, the cost of essential inputs like seeds, fertiliser and pesticides has escalated, diminishing the net gains from the increased MSP. The pervasive issue of debt, compounded by crop failures

and unpredictable market prices, further exacerbates the financial instability of farmers. These factors underscore the need for interventions that go beyond MSP hikes to address the underlying challenges faced by farmers. While the MSP increase is a positive step, it alone is unlikely to resolve the multifaceted issues confronting the agricultural sector. Comprehensive reforms are essential to ensure sustainable improvements in the livelihoods of farmers. To achieve this, the Government must consider a holistic approach that includes enhancing agricultural infrastructure, improving access to credit and providing insurance against crop failures. Encouraging crop diversification and improving market access can also help mitigate risks associated with price volatility and reduce farmers' reliance on a few staple crops. Strengthening procurement systems to ensure timely procurement and fair pricing is crucial to making the MSP more effective. The Cabinet's approval of increased MSP for 14 Kharif crops, though inadequate, is a welcome development that reflects the Government's recognition of the pressing challenges faced by the agricultural sector. A concerted effort to implement systemic reforms alongside fair pricing mechanisms is essential for the advancement of India's farmers and the agricultural sector as a whole..



People use umbrellas to shield themselves during rains, in Kanyakumari

PTI

# Benefits of integrating offline and online channels

As offline and online channels converge, businesses must adapt to ensure a seamless customer journey across all touchpoints

Expertise in channel management-as indeed in other fields-can often be self-referential. The conversations on universal principles for the management of the offline channel typically have little or no intersection with those for the online channel. While a number of these principles-developed in their silos-are indeed extremely useful, the consumer is (still) a person. Even in B2B businesses, the key decision-maker is a person or a group of persons. It is the 'people-ness' of these people (consumers, customers) that creates a case for integrated thinking. Consistency of what a brand is saying is important essentially because of the much-cited phenomenon of short attention spans. However, consistency is not sufficient-condition to get some of the scarce attention that's essential at the very top of the funnel (attention-> interest-> decision-> action, or AIDA, the old marketing reliable). For instance, the individual seeking a new smartphone is probably going to visit a big retail outlet, where they might interact with a brand repre-



sentative and try out a demo unit. They might come across an Instagram post highlighting a new model. If this person is inclined towards gathering information and may have also read some reviews online and watched a YouTube influencer comparing different models. A few years ago, the number of people who have both offline and online dimensions in their purchase decision might have been very small, but this cohort is quite salient now. The challenging aspect in this customer journey is that the last A in AIDA, 'action' (purchase) might happen offline or online. Therefore, segregated structures for offline and online channels are not sustainable in the long term. It is clearly in the brand's interest that offline and online channels are,

"telling the same story." Whether this story is of a new feature or a new colour, whether it be a story told in a YouTube video or by an in-store demonstrator. Integration of offline and online channels is, therefore, essential for a coherent conversation with the consumer. No smart manager starts with making a case for unintegrated offline and online channels. This situation arises because of some recurring, largely structural issues. The offline channel is often managed through a command-and-control structure that has evolved over decades, while the online channel is relatively more nascent. Companies taking the latter lightly is of course rarely the case now but there's still much to learn about its dynamics. The narrative of D2C (direct-to-consumer) models being unviable that has set in among many minds after the boom and bust in the fortunes of D2C startups may delay integration efforts, but will not stop the growth in the salience of online channels. Managerial specialisation is another reason for offline and online channels not being

integrated. Individuals who have acquired expertise through experience on offline channels are not necessarily the ones best suited to build or develop online channels, but with time this will change. Online and offline channels sometimes end up being unintegrated because of the list (or checklist) approach to channel execution. In this approach channel management is essentially a set of activities to be completed in a particular order. While the list approach is a hallmark of the manager who is strong at execution, it is not ideal for capturing strategic thinking. The choice of a metaphor that represents strategic thinking is essential for the integration of offline and online channels. Interconnected funnels might be a good, safe choice of metaphor in case a manager is struggling to find the ideal one for her context. Structural adjustments and readjustments will continue to happen, but integrated channel thinking is inevitable, because of its direct impact on customer experience. (The writer is Co-Founder of Channelplay; views are personal)



SUHAS MISRA

# Forest fires are a grim environmental reality

The devastating wildfires highlight a pressing environmental crisis compounded by human negligence and systemic failures



Raging wildlife fires in Uttarakhand have made headlines during the last month. These forest fires are a grim environmental reality and also a reflection of human faults in a society riddled with romanticism and unbridled freedom. Adding to this the situation of indiscipline and scant respect for the law, the disconcerting picture is complete. The incidents of resource-destroying wildlife forest fires in the green hilly State of Uttarakhand are due to three factors as obliquely indicated above. These are — faulty living paradigms resulting in environmental pollution, a growing culture of unrestrained freedom among the youth and a weak administrative system that is unable to enforce existing laws. Global warming due mainly to the huge use of hydrocarbon aviation fuels is the big reason for wild forest fires the likes of which are regularly observed in Australia and the USA. The forest fires of Uttarakhand were quite similar to the fires in these countries. The naturally growing *Chir Pine* trees in this State are stated to be susceptible to fires. However, the triggering cause of the fire is atmospheric warming due to vehicular and industrial pollution.

Uttarakhand has a vast belt of pollution causing the pharmaceutical industry of the modern allopathic school which makes extensive use of chemical raw materials. The other cause is mischief-mongering by delinquent youngsters as evident from the news that 3 persons hailing from Bihar were arrested for setting forest tracts in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district on fire to get more social media views. Finally, flagrant violation of environmental protection laws of the land through illegal tree felling and construction practices constitutes the third reason. The sorry fact is that the media provides detailed coverage of such incidents but gives very empirical and glib explanations as to the causes of incidents. It doesn't provide any in-depth analytical reports on such incidents which will throw light holistically on their occurrence and prevention. Wildfires are a regular phenomenon in Australia and the USA as well as in some European countries. And they are intriguing. Geologists and Meteorologists in those supposedly developed and well-

“THE MAIN REASON BEHIND THE OCCURRENCE OF WILDFIRES IS THE PRODUCTION OF EXCESSIVE HEAT AND DISTURBANCE OF WATER BALANCE IN THE ENVIRONMENT DUE TO EXCESSIVE HYDROCARBON BURNING

administered countries have neither complete nor correct explanations for these phenomena. But it is not difficult or impossible to arrive at the actual complete, scientific explanations. And that is possible only through the application of the scientific principles expounded in Vedic Physics. Through Vedic Physics, we can understand and explain all phenomena in nature precisely and perfectly. This is because; Vedic Physics provides a holistic exposition of natural phenomena. Its ambit covers the five primordial elements—earth, water, fire, air and ether. This exposition goes from outwardly perceptible physical events to the innermost levels of subtlest material existence. The Modern Physics of Western academia explains physical phenomena only to the extent of measurement of visible, audible or otherwise measurable physical phenomena. It has no concept of sub-nano material entities- mind (Anastasia) intellect (mahatatva) and divinely originating rays (rashmiyan). Also, it has very little or virtually no understanding of ether.

Discourse of our Sanatan scientific literature dating back to 15000 years ago unfolds the mysteries of material nature comprehensively. Some of these texts are Aitreya Brahman and Shathpath Brahman. Picking out threads of core scientific precepts from these texts will enable us to refine our living paradigms and technologies in line with Vedic sciences. It will enable us to make environment-friendly construction practices and prevent natural disasters and catastrophic events like wildfires. The main reason behind the occurrence of wildfires is the production of excessive heat and disturbance of water balance in the environment due to excessive hydrocarbon burning. The primordial water element is the antidote to the primordial fire element. Vedic sciences provide all the solutions. Scientists of the Western, modern school have none. We must turn to our rich traditional Sanatan scientific literature of the yore to bring safety, stability and sustainability to the world before it is too late. (The author is a management consultant; views are personal)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Modi's diplomatic engagements



Propos the news story "India's foreign policy under Modi 3.0," published on June 20, this is my response. In less than a week of assuming office as the Prime Minister for the world's largest democracy, Mr. Modi is back where he excels—on the global stage. His visit to Italy for the G7 meeting, coupled with several bilateral discussions, underscores his commitment to reinforcing India's international presence. This trip marks Modi's first abroad after being re-elected for a third term, a testament to his enduring influence and the resilience of India's democratic process. Despite not securing an outright majority, Modi's leadership is strengthened by a robust opposition, showcasing India's vibrant democracy amidst global democratic uncertainties. His experienced diplomatic team, led by seasoned External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, continues to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. PM Modi's visit highlights India's strategic balancing act, especially regarding sensitive issues like the Ukraine conflict and Israel's security situation. As global dynamics evolve, India's role remains pivotal, further cemented by Modi's diplomatic engagements and the nation's unwavering democratic principles.

Aarohi Sharma | Jammu

Additionally, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have made progress in combating terrorism by arresting an accomplice involved in a recent attack on a pilgrim bus. This demonstrates a proactive approach to addressing security threats. The Prime Minister's schedule includes inaugurating development projects and participating in International Yoga Day, reflecting his commitment to promoting health and unity. The event promises to bring together thousands, emphasising the global impact of yoga.

Reyansh Tiwari | Tirupati

### NAM FACES MYRIAD CHALLENGES

Madam — Apropos the news story "NAM faces challenges of neo-colonialism," published on June 20, this is my response. Churchill's warning that "those who forget history are condemned to repeat it" remains relevant. Reflecting on his 1948 speech, it's evident he criticised the colonial past while paradoxically supporting its continuation in Asia and Africa post-World War II. This paradox underlines the complex legacy of colonialism, still echoed

today. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1955 with India as a key player, sought to protect nations' sovereignty from colonial influences. NAM became a significant force, advocating for neutrality and independence during the Cold War. However, its relevance has waned post-Cold War as new forms of neo-colonialism—via economic and media control—emerge. Recent actions by France, maintaining economic dominance in African countries and interfering in geopolitical issues like Nagorno-Karabakh, highlight ongoing neo-colonialism. NAM's resurgence under Azerbaijan's leadership signals a renewed commitment to combating these modern threats. With Uganda set to lead NAM, it's crucial for member nations, including India, to unite against neo-colonialist pressures and uphold the movement's founding principles to ensure global sovereignty and peace.

Dhruv Patel | Rourkela

Send your feedback to: [letterstopioneer@gmail.com](mailto:letterstopioneer@gmail.com)



FIRST COLUMN

G7 SUMMIT AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Summit acknowledged the critical role of the Global South



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

The recent G7 meeting held in picturesque Apulia, Italy, had several pointers on the recent geopolitical shifts and changing equations between some of the most powerful nations in the world. Yes, the meme-worthy, Pictures of Stares, Namaskars and Parachute Landings, kept the social media alive and brought energy to an otherwise, boring round of meetings and dinners of world leaders, discussing topics of shared interest, the underlining points were not missed. First, the clear focus of the meeting, as highlighted in the joint communique was Ukraine to send some tough messages to China and other parties working covertly with Russia. In a not-so-veiled message and directly naming China the Joint Statement read “We will continue taking measures against actors in China and third countries that materially support Russia’s war machine, including financial institutions, consistent with our legal systems and other entities in China that facilitate Russia’s acquisition of items for its defense industrial base. We reiterate that entities, including financial institutions, that facilitate Russia’s acquisition of items or equipment for its defense industrial base are supporting actions that undermine the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. Accordingly, we will impose restrictive measures consistent with our legal systems to prevent abuse and restrict access to our financial systems for targeted individuals and entities in third countries, including Chinese entities, that engage in this activity. “The message to China was, don’t keep playing with fire, as one day, it may singe you. It may be worth mentioning that the US has undertaken several export control measures to prevent the transfer of high-tech equipment to China, which have dual-purpose utilities, i.e. can be used for making precision weapons as well as cyber surveillance tools. China was the only large economy, (not so direct a party to the Russia-Ukraine war), which was absent from the G7 summit. Recently Chinese President Xi Jinping undertook a tour of several European countries to ease the tariff-related issues, imposed by several European nations, against Chinese electrical vehicles. While some nations in Europe are committed to the US-led vision of hard measures on China, several others are on the fringe, tilting towards China.



Meanwhile, this G7 summit, in a backhanded compliment of sorts, for Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s vision of inclusion of Global South countries in world affairs, reiterated the importance of African nations and pledged several measures to boost the economic prosperity of the region. The Joint Statement Stated “We endorse African countries’ call for greater voice in international bodies and welcome the AU’s participation in the G20 as a permanent member and the creation of a third Chair for sub-Saharan Africa at the IMF Executive Board in November. We reiterate our support for the G20 Compact with Africa, as a tool to increase private sector investments, promote structural reforms and local entrepreneurship support and enhance cooperation, including in the energy sector.” PM Modi who was also in Apulia, as a special invitee, in his brief outreach session addressed highlighted the preeminence of Global South countries. He said “The countries of the Global South are bearing the brunt of global uncertainties and tensions. India has considered it its responsibility to place the priorities and concerns of the countries of the Global South on the world stage. We have given high priority to Africa in these efforts. We are proud that the G-20, under India’s chairmanship, made the African Union a permanent member. India has been contributing to the economic and social development, stability and security of all African countries and will continue to do so.” A new world order with multiple voices opining on global matters, at a time when existing political structures are being challenged domestically, was one clear message from the G7 meeting in Italy. *(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)*

# The unseen burden of women’s unpaid labour

Globally, women spend significant time on unpaid care work, limiting their participation in the labour market and affecting economic stability



ARCHANA DATTA

In the early 60s when Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro, who died recently, earned some success, a newspaper ran a piece on her, which had a condescending headline the ‘housewife who finds time to write short stories’. The banter fell through Alice and she went on to win a Nobel in literature in 2013. While another Nobel winner in Economics in 2023, Claudia Goldin, explained in her research that a woman’s vocation is not always guided by her choice, but, more often by the ‘long-standing societal trends’, which build a ‘cult of domesticity’ around her, idealising her role as an unpaid caregiver. Not surprising that women spend almost 76.2 per cent of total hours, three times more than men, on unpaid care work (ILO). Of all regions, the Pacific and Asia present the worst scenario, with men performing the lowest share of unpaid care work (1 hour and 4 minutes). In 2018, 606 million working-age women expressed disappointment that they failed to enter the labour market because of the burden of unpaid care work, which was the case for only 41 million men. In terms of monetary value, women’s unpaid work may exceed up to 40 per cent of GDP in some countries (ILO). Social scientists contend that child-bearing, as well as the age and number of children, more than marriage, impede women’s entry into the labour market. Women (aged 25-54) face a wide disparity in labour force participation rate (LFPR), which remains only 61.4 per cent, as against men’s 90.6 per cent (World Bank, 2022). While, in the lone women households, with at least one child under 6, economic compulsion lifts women’s LFPR to about 65.8 per cent, but, it goes down to 48.7 per cent, when mothers live with a partner and a young child, as the ‘male breadwinner’ syndrome prevails (UNWomen). Notwithstanding, the ‘breadwinner moms’ also bear a heavier load at home,



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even if they out-earn their husbands’ (Pew Research Centre). While, the ‘motherhood penalty’ is very much persistent in the USA (Harvard, 23). ‘Moms were six times less likely than non-mothers and 3.35 times less likely than child-free men to be recommended for a hire...and are 114 per cent more likely than dads to take a career pause (Mom Project, US, a career-resource platform for working mothers). ‘If a kid is sick,..... it’s going to be the woman to take time off, because they are paid less, which makes more economic sense’ (PNAS, 2023). While, a report by the British trade union association TUC, said that ‘men do not face a penalty as parents at all, rather, fathers who work full time, experience a wage bonus, when they have children, earning 22 per cent more’. ‘The disparity arises not because mothers actually become less productive employees, or fathers work harder becoming parents, but, because employers expect them to be so, indicating a clear-cut culture bias about gender and work’, said Michelle Budig, a sociology professor, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her research further revealed that on average, men’s earnings increased by more than 6 per cent when they had children, if they lived with them, while, women’s decreased by 4 per cent for each child they had (National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, US, 1979 to 2006). In India, childbirth impacts women’s entry into the labour market, but, differently, in the context of urban and rural. A study, collecting the Life History Calendar (LHC) data from the


States of Karnataka and Rajasthan, suggested that motherhood may not be accompanied by a penalty in terms of labour market participation for rural women because of the predominance of informal and flexible employment, which are more conducive for childcare responsibilities than work in an urban or more formalised setting (Gautham 2021). The analysis of data from the Employment-Unemployment Schedule (EUS) of the NSS from 2004 to 2012 revealed that rural motherhood wage penalties are close to zero, whereas, urban women pay a large penalty of about 18 per cent of total wages and highly educated women, or women in regular or salaried wage work, incur a larger wage penalty after motherhood than their less educated or casual wage counterparts (Wilde et al. 2010). However, first-time fathers, both rural and urban, experience no negative wage effects following the birth of children. The lack of childcare facilities is one of the most significant impediments to gender equality in job markets (UNWomen). A macro-econometric analysis of childcare policies in 18 OECD countries (1980-2007) commented that measures like high levels of employment protection and longer paid leave are crucial for the survival of working mothers (Thévenon, 2013). In 2016, an analytical study (ITUC) in seven high-income OECD countries, appraised that an investment of two per cent of GDP in the care industry, could create nearly 13 million new jobs in the US, 3.5 million in Japan, nearly 2 million in Germany, 1.5 million in the UK, 1 million in Italy, 600,000 in

Australia and nearly 120,000 in Denmark and boost women’s employment rate by 3.3 to 8.2 percentage points, as against men’s 1.4 to 4.0 percentage points. Subsequently, similar research (ITUC) in emerging economies such as Brazil, Costa Rica, China (People’s Republic), India, Indonesia and South Africa, also substantiated that the same amount of investment in the health and care sector would bolster nearly 24 million new jobs would in China, 11 million in India, nearly 2.8 million in Indonesia, 4.2 million in Brazil and over 400,000 in South Africa and 63,000 in Costa Rica. While, the ILO’s recent global ‘Care at Work’ report exhorted that to reducing the gender gap in employment by 7 percentage points and the monthly earnings gap to 1.8 per cent by 2035, a sustainable annual investment of over \$204 billion, an average of 5.8 per cent of GDP per country, should be invested for universal childcare and long-term care services. While, feminist economists (Elson et al.) and proponents of the Purple Economy (Ilkharacan), vouched for recognising care as ‘an indispensable component of human well-being’ and called for a ‘caring and gender equal economic and social order’, by sharing caregiving responsibilities between the State and households and women and men. It is high time now that the world fulfils its SDG 2030 commitments and ensures women’s economic justice and equality, with appropriate policy formulations and resource allocations. *(The author is former Director General, Doordarshan & All India Radio, views are personal)*

# UGC set to revolutionise higher education in India

The University Grants Commission has introduced a transformative policy that is expected to align India with global educational practices

The University Grants Commission (UGC) in its recent decision has allowed Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which offer programs in regular mode, to admit students twice a year, from the coming academic year. This option would be made available only in those HEIs that intend to increase their student intake and offer new programmes in emerging areas. Earlier, the UGC had decided in its 571st commission held on 25 July 2023 to permit biannual admissions under Open and Distance Learning (ODL) and Online modes in January and July during an academic year. Last year, after the UGC had permitted two cycle admissions in a year for ODL and Online modes, in addition to



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countries this biannual mode of admissions exists for the diploma, degree and post-graduation courses after the senior secondary education. It will enhance international collaborations and student exchanges from foreign countries. As a result, the global competitiveness will improve and will be in alignment with the global educational standards. The biannual university admissions will help students who missed an entrance owing to a delayed result or health reasons, as they do not have to wait for one another full year. Most of the institution heads have welcomed the step, owing to the official directive and secondly as the intake will bring in extra revenue to their institutes. Some of them want to

test the water by introducing it in some selected courses. On the other side, some of them expressed concern over the additional space, infrastructure and faculty required to handle this extra burden of students. Enhancing the quantity is good, but the cost of the quality is what some educational experts fear. Recently, a German IT professional was travelling from Delhi to Dehradun on a Shatabdi train. He was on his vacation trip to India after a six-month long professional hard work. He narrated how the Germans work, “When they work, they work and then spare a few months to upgrade their skills and also go in a hibernation mode of rest for reviving themselves.” Whereas, we Indians, either

work throughout the 12 months of spring, winter, rainy and summer seasons; or follow a lacklustre attitude and take a back seat. In India, many scholars pursue a doctorate for the sake of procuring a PhD degree after their post-graduation. Whereas, in European countries like Germany, students while pursuing their secondary education develop the flare for a particular vocational course and practice it on grounds. After a while, they return to learn more about that particular profession through higher studies. No doubt, many of them do their PhD in plumbing or automobiles and add value to their profession. In countries like Germany, education is a lifelong learning process and addresses the

ever-changing demands of the labour market. The learning is procured through adult education, professional development, recognising prior experience, flexible learning pathways and providing opportunities for seniors to pursue personal interests. The ongoing learning and training is imparted through Evening classes, Workshops, Vocational courses and Non-formal educational programs tailored to adults seeking to acquire new skills or qualifications. These educational opportunities are provided by diverse entities, including municipal and private institutions, religious organisations, trade unions, industry and commerce chambers, associations, political parties, businesses, Government agencies, academies, family education centres, vocational schools, as well as media outlets like radio and television. In India, the recently introduced vocational degree courses like BVoc and MVoc have failed to take off and get the desired results as expected. The adult mindset is different here, as they prefer a white-collar job. But the reality is different. One of the ITI pass out in the AC stream, Mr Khatri, an entrepreneur was recently awarded for his turnover of over Rs 10 crore per year. It is not the Degrees, but the determination and expertise in their profession, that makes a person successful. In most of the developed countries like the USA, Canada, Australia, the UK and Germany, college stu-

dents while pursuing their higher studies work and earn. The literacy campaign and the efforts to bring back the school dropouts in India have yielded good results. The missing link is the flare for a particular vocational course, hands-on training, experience in the respective field and the confidence to be of their own. A change in the mindset of senior secondary-level students towards their career perspective can make a difference. Adopting the worldwide model of universities is good, but engaging them after this biannual mode of education is what the policymakers need to ponder upon. *(The writer is a former editor and former media advisor to the Delhi Government; views are personal)*