

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Unfair play

Khelo India must reward best-performing states

THE timing couldn't have been worse. A controversy has erupted over the allocation of funds to the states for the development of sports infrastructure under the Centre's Khelo India Scheme, even as Indian players are battling it out to win medals in the Paris Olympics. The Congress-led Opposition and a section of the sports fraternity have accused the Centre of discriminating with states such as Haryana and Punjab. Haryana, which accounts for one-fifth of the athletes in the Indian contingent, has been allocated Rs 66.6 crore under the scheme, while Gujarat, which has sent only a couple of players to the Games, has got Rs 426 crore; Uttar Pradesh has received Rs 438 crore, though only six athletes from the state are representing the country in Paris. The share of Punjab, which has an dominant presence in the Indian men's hockey team, is Rs 78 crore.

The 'Khelo India — National Programme for Development of Sports' was launched in 2016-17 with the twin objectives of mass participation and promotion of excellence across the country. The creation and upgradation of sports infrastructure are central to this ambitious programme, which the government claims is spurring sports persons to raise the bar in national and international events. However, with some states performing better than others in terms of producing national/international-level players, the funding should be proportionate to the sporting success, something on the lines of the production-linked incentive schemes for the industry.

The Centre needs to spell out the criteria for the allocation of funds. Is it based on the geographical area and population of the respective states or are there other considerations? In any case, a thorough review of the scheme is a must to address disparities. At the same time, it is imperative to monitor the use of funds by various states to ensure that corruption and red tape don't defeat the very purpose of Khelo India.

## Hamas chief's killing

A trigger for soaring West Asia tensions

THE assassination of Hamas' political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran marks a perilous escalation in already volatile West Asia. Haniyeh, killed by an airborne guided projectile, was in Iran for the inauguration of President Masoud Pezeshkian. The timing and location of the killing were not coincidental, aiming to embarrass Tehran and destabilise the region further. Haniyeh's death reverberates far beyond Gaza. As a crucial figure in ceasefire negotiations, his absence shatters the fragile hope for peace. Qatar's Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, has rightly questioned the viability of mediation when one party eliminates key negotiators from the other side. The assassination has undermined diplomatic efforts aimed at halting the violence.

Suspicion falls on Israel, though no official claim of responsibility has been made. The context, however, points towards a broader strategy to weaken Iran-backed militant groups. This move follows a targeted strike in Beirut that killed senior Hezbollah commander Rued Shakr. These actions suggest a coordinated effort to neutralise perceived threats, yet they also risk igniting a wider conflict involving multiple state and non-state actors. Iran's response has been predictably fierce, with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei promising harsh retaliation. The assassination could draw Iran into a direct conflict with Israel. The US, while denying involvement, remains a critical player in this geopolitical chess game, with its unwavering support for Israel complicating peace efforts.

In Gaza and the broader Palestinian territories, Haniyeh was seen as a pragmatic leader. His death could embolden more hardline factions within Hamas, escalating violence and reducing the chances of a diplomatic resolution. The situation demands a concerted international effort to de-escalate tensions. Otherwise, West Asia risks sliding into an all-out war, with catastrophic consequences for regional and global stability.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

### The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, AUGUST 3, 1924

#### The new Governor

WHETHER for good reasons or bad, it is usual to look into the first public utterance of a Governor or Governor-General for some indication of the policy which he proposes to follow. The practice has undoubtedly its basis in experience, though experience does not in all cases support the practice. In reality, in at least as many as not, Governors and Governors-General have entirely failed to carry out the promises made by them in their first public utterances. The most conspicuous case in point is that of the present Viceroy himself. No Viceroy ever came out to India with more high-sounding words on his lips. None more speedily or more completely disappointed the hopes which his words had aroused. From this point of view, it is no matter for regret that the first public speech of Sir Malcolm Hailey as Governor of Punjab, the speech made by him at Julundur in reply to the addresses of welcome presented to him by several public bodies, contains no startling announcement of a new policy. In point of fact, the greater part of the speech does not rise above the commonplace whether in the sentiments it breathes or the manner in which they are expressed. There are three matters of general interest to which Sir Malcolm referred in his speech. Referring to the Babbar Akali trouble, which happily is now a thing of the past, His Excellency said: "If the primary object of the Government, whatever form it may take, however it may be constituted, is to secure the contentment of the people, the first essential for such contentment is the safeguarding of the lives and properties of its citizens; that object can only be attained with the fullest cooperation of all classes."

# Sukhu takes the road less travelled

Himachal Chief Minister goes ahead with 'unpopular' reform in the power sector



## THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

HIMACHAL Pradesh chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu must be intimately familiar with the Hindi heartland metaphor 'raja-runk' or 'king-commoner', which signifies the gaping chasm between those born with a silver spoon and those whose parents toiled hard night after night for their supper. This March, it would have been whispered across Shimla, in public space and private quarters — hissing through the clammy cold season, insinuating itself across both rebel and loyalist camps — when fellow Congress MLA Vikramaditya Singh mounted his rebellion against Sukhu and nearly wrecked the state government.

It took all the wily chutzpah of the southern Congress leadership to pull the frozen fat out of the fire. As Vikramaditya, son of six-time Himachal CM Virbhadra Singh and former raja from the erstwhile princely state of Bushahr, waited for the party high command to throw its weight behind his insurrection against the commoner Chief Minister — and no doubt, instal him in his place — Sukhu played his master card. The son of a former Himachal Roadways bus conductor, he put out that he had risen through the party ranks. That he had promised to eliminate corruption, just as the Gandhi high command had insisted. That he had never been swayed by the temptations offered by the BJP.

In the end, Vikramaditya wavered but never quit the party, unlike six other rebel MLAs and three Independents. Four of the



OBJECTIVE: Sukhu knows that if Himachal does well, he will look good. TRIBUNE PHOTO

six rebels lost in the recent Assembly bypolls (they may have cursed their turn of fate). Moreover, Vikramaditya lost to Kangana Ranaut from the Mandi Lok Sabha seat — another masterstroke by Sukhu, who may have encouraged the younger, high-profile colleague to reach for the stars. The CM consolidated his position when his wife, Kamlesh Thakur, won one of the seats that had fallen vacant during the March rebellion.

But this unusual politician has not been content to rest on his laurels. Unlike Punjab next door, which is simply unable to balance its books because it has over-promised a variety of goodies, especially on the free power front, for decades — Himachal's Sukhu not just went back on his 2022 campaign promise to provide 300 units of power free of cost to every family, he recently announced withdrawal of the subsidy to the affluent.

There were key strings attached. The power reform will only apply to taxpayers. The free units' amount has come down from 300 to 125 — a promise made by the previous BJP government. Those availing the subsidy will be restricted to "one family, one meter" (in Punjab,

Only southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which are far richer, have been able to touch the subject of power subsidy.

rich people who live in the same house have several meters installed so they can avail 300 units of free power per meter and officials say they can do nothing). All electricity connections will be linked to ration cards or Aadhaar cards. All those who have installed meters without a no-objection certificate will have to pay.

Sukhu's move hasn't attracted the attention it has deserved, but it fully deserves to. Power reform is especially unpopular anywhere in the country — but

the comparison between Himachal and Punjab is especially stark. Never mind that Himachal has a much smaller population (77 lakh against Punjab's 3.17 crore), is largely hilly unlike the flat, fertile lands of the plains, and far less dependent on the cultivation of water-and-free power-guzzling wheat and paddy.

Sukhu is smart. He clearly has ambitions for his state — if Himachal does well, he knows he will look good. By defanging the snakes in his own backyard (Congress rebels voting against the official candidate in the February Rajya Sabha election were called 'kaale naag') as well as those outside, he has successfully consolidated his position. This has enabled him to take the political risk to touch the hugely sensitive subject of taking money out of the pockets of the people.

In this age of social media, and therefore instant gratification, this is hugely creditable. Only southern states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which are far richer, have been able to touch this subject and that too with trepidation. Sukhu has clearly taken a leaf out of their book. Kerala brought down its power subsidy

in November 2023 to only 30 units. Tamil Nadu gives only 100 units free. Sukhu put out that the state is broke; that the total debt had crossed Rs 85,000 crore; that the state electricity board had accumulated losses of Rs 1,800 crore just in 2023-24 (the board gets a grant of Rs 950 crore from the state government).

The government hopes to save a mere Rs 200 crore from the reform. But just look at who will have to start paying their electricity bills — all serving and former ministers, all sitting and former MPs, all sitting and former MLAs, all IAS, IPS and state-cadre officers, all Class 1 & 2 officers as well as other income taxpayers.

Clearly, Sukhu is a role model not just for the rest of North India, but also for the rest of the country. Like Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who in the recent Budget reduced the subsidy for food, fertilisers and fuel by 7.8 per cent (from Rs 413,466 crore to Rs 381,175 crore), Sukhu is one of the few politicians who understands that it's hugely important to streamline government expenditure. He knows elections are three years away, so it's a good idea to get the pain over with early. It is said that he may likely next touch the subsidy for water — right now, water is practically free across the state — and even free travel for women. He is also planning to merge schools with low footfall (less than five students per class), transfer the teachers to schools where there aren't any and use the extra buildings for libraries.

Perhaps there's a long distance between the cup and the lip. But if Sukhu can succeed in reinvigorating his hill economy, he will stand out in a group of men permanently supplicating at the Delhi Durbar — by refusing to do so. Perhaps it's too early to tell. For sure, the jury is still out. But if the signs are what they are, Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu's journey will be an interesting one to watch.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Poorly designed subsidies either do very little or actually make things worse for the poor. — Abhijit Banerjee

## The war memorial that was never built

GS AUJLA

IN the heart of Central London is the famous Trafalgar Square with a Corinthian pillar erected for Lord Nelson, the hero of the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). Alongside, a memorial would have been raised to commemorate the First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46). However, the plan was shelved due to the economic crisis that resulted from the expenses incurred by the East India Company in the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-49) and the British Government in the Crimean War (1853-56).

British Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson had spearheaded a decisive victory over the French and Spanish navies, dealing a crushing blow to Napoleon's plan of invading Britain by sea. The one-eyed Nelson lost his life in the 1805 battle. A decade later, Napoleon lost on land as well in the Battle of Waterloo.

The British Government decided in 1838 that the Nelson Column would be erected at a strategic spot in the city of Westminster. An imposing monument was constructed between 1840 and 1843 at a cost of £47,000. Designed by William Railton, it was built from Dartmoor granite with four Barbary bronze lions at the base of the column. Nelson's statue that was put atop the pillar was carved by renowned sculptor Edward Hodges Baily.

The parliamentary committee assigned to complete the Nelson memorial ran out of funds; this also stood in the way of the other memorial. The Anglo-Sikh war monument was conceived after the signing of the Treaty of Lahore (1846) following the First Anglo-Sikh War in which the brave forces of the Sikh empire put up an unprecedented challenge to the troops of the East India Company. According to Col George Bruce Mangleson, the author of *The Decisive Battles of India*, 'Victory for the Sikhs — a victory twice within their grasp — would have meant to the English the loss of India.' Amid the perfidy of Generals Tej Singh and Lal Singh, the bravery and martyrdom of General Sham Singh Attariwala were legendary.

The design of the Anglo-Sikh War memorial, a drawing of which surfaced in a private collection donated in 2016 to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York by philanthropist and art collector Jayne Kirkman Wrightsman, shows a magnificent structure drawn in water colour and pencil on a white gouache sheet. She and her husband, Charles B Wrightsman, donated rare pieces of art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Borrowing some features of the Nelson Column, like four relief panels on four sides with Barbary lions, the memorial was to have scenes of four major theatres of the war — Sabraon, Mudki, Ferozeshah and Baddowal. The edifice was to be far more ornate than the Nelson Monument.

The memorial would have symbolised the British pride in having won a significant battle far away from the mainland, while at the same time bearing testimony to the bravery of Punjabi soldiers who delivered a near-fatal blow to the British a century before the rulers' departure from India in 1947.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A step towards fairness

The Supreme Court's ruling on the sub-classification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is a landmark decision, one that acknowledges that not all within a reserved category are equal. The 'quota within quota' system aims to uplift the neediest and poorest, as some sections have benefited disproportionately. The states must now identify those falling in the creamy layer and exclude them from reservations. This exercise requires a rational and calibrated approach, balancing political and social considerations. Addressing intra-quota imbalances can go a long way towards uplifting those who have long been left behind. The SC verdict has the potential to transform the quota system by ensuring that benefits reach those who need them the most.

AMANJOT KAUR, MOHALI

### Govt punishing the policyholders

Refer to the editorial 'End the burden'; Union Minister Nitin Gadkari has done well to call for the abolition of the 18 per cent GST on life and medical insurance premiums. It is the government's inability to cover the cost of the citizens' treatment that prompts them to sign up for health insurance policies. By levying a heavy tax on premiums, the government is penalising the policyholders for its own failure to provide them with a safety net against the uncertainties of life.

YOGINDER SINGHAL, LADWA

### Skewed allocation of funds

The unfair distribution of funds under the Khelo India scheme smacks of bias. The fact that Haryana has received a meagre sum of Rs 66 crore, while Gujarat — which has sent only two athletes to the Olympics — has secured a whopping Rs 426 crore, is condemnable. Eyebrows are also being raised over the fact that UP, another BJP-ruled state, could manage a staggering Rs 438 crore in funds under the scheme, even though only six athletes from there are representing India in Paris. Punjab, on the other hand, has netted merely Rs 78 crore. Why is preferential treatment being given to some states where the BJP is in power?

BALVINDER, CHANDIGARH

### Invest in robust infrastructure

Apropos of the front-page news report 'Monsoon mayhem in north'; multiple persons have been killed in three separate incidents of cloudburst in Shimla, Kullu and Mandi. It is deeply concerning that the HP Government has not drawn any lessons from the rain-triggered landslides that wrought havoc on the hill state last year. The authorities concerned have clearly failed to take concrete measures to prevent the recurrence of such tragedies. Besides, the lack of robust infrastructure and evacuation plans leaves entire communities at the mercy of nature. It is imperative that the powers that be invest in advanced weather forecasting technologies and resilient infrastructure. Further, they must ensure a rapid response to calamities to mitigate the loss of lives.

SAMRIDHI KAPOOR, PANCHKULA

### Nature unleashes its wrath again

Unchecked deforestation and other human activities that adversely affect the ecology are to blame for the devastating cloudbursts that have roiled Himachal Pradesh. Mother Nature is sending a stern warning to humankind: mend your ways. The least that we can do now is heed her message and vow not to tamper with nature any further. The construction of houses and hotels along the banks of rivers and streams must be stopped immediately. All local residents must be evacuated as soon as possible. Environmental norms must not go for a toss again.

COL. RS NARULA (RETD), PATIALA

### Rubbing salt in farmers' wounds

The Haryana Government's proposal of awarding gallantry medals to six police personnel for showing courage in stopping protesting farmers at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders in February this year is provocative. The move runs counter to the spirit of democratic institutions. It gives one the impression that the agitating tillers' activities were anti-national. Rather than helping address the farmers' long-pending demands, the state government is rubbing salt in their wounds. The Centre must step in and resume dialogue with the farmer unions.

JAGDISH CHANDER, JALANDHAR

# Capital outlays at the core of defence capabilities



**LT GEN PRADEEP BALI (RETD)**  
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

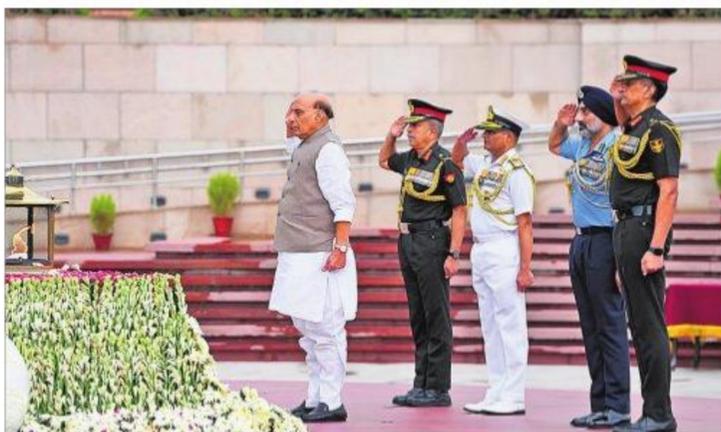
**T**HIS calendar year has seen the tabling of two Budgets — the interim one on February 1 and the full one for 2024-25 on July 23. The allocations for the defence sector have not seen any major variation, belying hopes that Modi 3.0 would focus more on capability enhancement of the armed forces. The defence expenditure as a share of the total expenditure has declined from 17.8 per cent in 2016-17 to 13.9 per cent in 2023-24 (revised estimates) and 12.9 per cent for the current fiscal. Overall spending for FY 2024-25 has increased only by 4.8 per cent over FY 2023-24. Adherence to fiscal strictness in government expenditure may partially explain why the Modi government has kept the increase in defence expenditure minimal.

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has a total allocation of Rs 6,21,941 crore. Within this kitty, 27.7 per cent is for planned capital acquisitions, aimed at equipping the armed forces with advanced technology and weaponry.

14.8 per cent for revenue expenditure, 53.3 per cent for salaries and pensions, and 4.2 per cent for civil organisations under the MoD. To boost indigenous defence production, Rs 1,05,518 crore has been allocated for domestic capital procurement out of the total capital head.

The continuing inimical activities by our northern and western neighbours, the need to ensure maritime security, and having the ability to deter the enemy on land, in the sea and the air, are inescapable realities that narrow down our options. A robust financial outlay for defence is thus imperative for any FM. However, a cursory look at the outlays indicates a largely status quoist approach. Factoring in inflation makes percentage increases largely cosmetic and just about adequate to meet immediate needs. Any attempted dexterity in spending is hemmed in by committed liabilities consuming the larger part of capital outlays.

Though the defence expenditure is the largest component of the Union Budget, one sees little result-oriented discussion and informed debates on it. Even the well-thought-out recommendations of the Standing Committee for Defence remain bereft of action. A long-standing recommendation, which had also been projected by the 15th Finance Commission, was the creation of a non-lapsable modernisation fund for defence and internal security. However, this has not matured



**NATIONAL SECURITY:** The sine qua non of Viksit Bharat is Surakshit Bharat. ❧

into a working mechanism. The security situation in the neighbourhood as well as globally remains unpredictable. We, however, have been mostly reactive in dealing with any crisis to the extent that even funding is met in an emergency mode.

Building capacities and developing capabilities need time, while intentions can change rapidly. Cost-intensive infusion of high-end technology in military systems and equipment, which in the present day also includes cyberspace, space and unmanned platforms, has to be ongoing. While planning for our defence, we need to clearly understand that capital outlays are the foundation of capabilities.

The 'capital good, revenue bad' analysis is a regular part

Any nation keen to raise the quality of life of its citizens requires serious efforts and substantial resources

of discussions on the defence budget. This is more of a slogan than a cogent analysis. The revenue head includes expenditures on sustenance, operational preparedness, continuing procurement and maintenance of in-service equipment. The situation we face in J&K and on the borders with China and Pakistan makes a manpower-intensive posture imperative and inevitable. Salaries and pensions are a function of the size of the forces needed to be maintained, based not only on operational needs but also on the methods of application in such a scenario. The cost of the human resource required for this is as necessary as any weapon platform. The 'capital versus revenue' argument is not of much consequence outside of account

books. It also needs no reiteration that defence pensions are a sovereign promise to the soldier and his family for his service to the nation.

As much as 75 per cent of the outlay for modernisation will be spent on sourcing from the domestic industry, in line with the focus on *Aatmanirbharta*, and Rs 43,000 crore will be spent on imports dedicated to capital acquisitions. The lead times necessary to develop, produce and deploy critical technologies and weapon systems are considerable. Boosting indigenous production of defence equipment has to be an important pillar of our defence policy, but this will be a long, ongoing process and cannot meet current requirements in an optimal manner. Then again, our indigenisation efforts must be freed from stifling procedures. There has to be a concerted effort for encouraging startups and private players in defence production by an underwritten assurance of confirmed orders for viable products within a clear timeline, failing which the project could be foreclosed.

Unlike in the past, the current defence budget does not spell out distribution of capital expenditure among the three services, on the grounds of fostering jointness. This obstructs the estimation of service-wise share. This also leads to an issue of concern from the past — the lapsing of the capital budget of the Army. While the Navy and the Air Force are plat-

form-centric in their capital inventory, with big budget systems, the Army has a huge inventory of small and medium-level weapons and equipment. The fault lies primarily in procedural delays, over-shooting trial timelines and contractual issues, most of which are beyond the control of the Army HQ directorates dealing with procurement. The acquisition vertical of the MoD should be fully accountable for this and reasons need to be ascertained for missing the expenditure targets.

The defence budget must be capability-driven and not intention-driven. A firm step in this direction would be to make the capital budget 'non-lapsable' and 'roll-on' in nature, with a five-year time span. A non-lapsable military modernisation fund must be created and a Defence Commission constituted to ensure that this is utilised optimally by being the bridge between Service HQs and the Cabinet Committee on Security. A draft Cabinet note for such a fund has been under consideration by the government for quite some time now and needs to be approved expeditiously.

Any nation keen to raise the quality of life of its citizens requires serious efforts and substantial resources. India, too, is engaged in this journey towards development. We must never forget, however, that the sine qua non of *Viksit Bharat* is *Surakshit Bharat*.

# Need more govt colleges, job avenues to rein in coaching culture



**PREM CHOWDHRY**  
FORMER SENIOR ACADEMIC FELLOW, INDIAN COUNCIL OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

**T**HE death of three young IAS aspirants in the flooded basement of a coaching centre in Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar has turned the spotlight on glaring irregularities in the functioning of such 'teaching shops'. These centres cater to students preparing for NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test) to get admission into undergraduate medical programmes and the exams conducted by the UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) for the recruitment of officers to the All India Services and the Central Civil Services. The centres are thronged by millions of career-conscious students. Cashing in on the aspirants' desperation, the institutes charge them exorbitant fees but fail to ensure even basic facilities, as seen in the Delhi tragedy. Most of these centres rent cheap accommodation to teach students and admit far more of them than their premises can accommodate. The AAP government and

the BJP are blaming each other for the Delhi mishap. This political blame game has drowned out the cries of the aggrieved families and the protests of the vulnerable students. There are hundreds of coaching centres in Delhi-NCR. Many of them operate under unsafe conditions. Commercially motivated, they are least bothered about the safety of the students. A handful of coaching centres operating in violation of the rules have been sealed, encroachments over drains bulldozed and a high-level probe committee set up. Arrests have been made in connection with the incident, and several protests have been held. The need of the hour, however, is to understand the problem and find long-term solutions.

In January this year, in view of the rising cases of student suicide, the Ministry of Education had issued guidelines for the regulation of coaching centres. However, as the senior secondary stage (a two-year academic phase followed uniformly across the country) covers classes XI and XII — which have students aged between 16 and 18 years — it is considered the responsibility of the states and union territories concerned. They were instructed to take necessary steps to regulate coaching centres falling under their jurisdiction in order to ensure the safety and securi-



**DELHI TRAGEDY:** A handful of coaching centres operating in violation of the rules have been sealed, encroachments over drains bulldozed and a high-level probe committee set up. TRIBUNE PHOTO

ty of students and save them from being exploited. The National Education Policy-2020 had warned against the 'coaching culture' and its harmful impact. It had even suggested reform in the existing system of board and entrance examinations to eliminate the need for coaching classes. It also proposed viable models of board exams that could reduce pressure and check the coaching culture. A high-quality common aptitude test and specialised common subject exams in the sciences, humanities, languages, arts and vocational subjects at least twice every year were recommended. Such exams were

There are hundreds of coaching centres in Delhi-NCR. Many of them operate under unsafe conditions.

meant to test the conceptual understanding of the students and eliminate the need for coaching for the exams. Students could choose the subjects of their interest.

The set of guidelines issued in January made it mandatory to get prior permission to establish a coaching centre. It also laid down the norms for infrastructure, fire and building safety, medical assistance or treatment facilities, emergency services, etc. The coaching centre buildings are required to be fully electrified, well ventilated and have sufficient lighting arrangements in each classroom. These centres are also

advised to involve counsellors and psychologists for providing psychotherapeutic help to students suffering from stress or depression.

In case a coaching centre violates any of the terms and conditions of registration or general requirements, it is liable for penalties — a fine of Rs 25,000 for the first offence, Rs 1 lakh for the second violation and the revocation of registration in case of subsequent breaches.

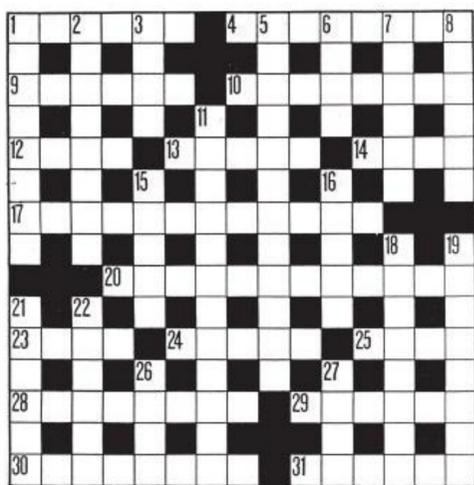
These guidelines have reportedly not been implemented. The Delhi tragedy was a result of that. It is time for the government to ensure that such centres are properly regulated. A minimum amount of space required for students must be maintained. If possible, the fees should also be regulated. All aspects of such centres must be periodically monitored and those not conforming to the guidelines must be shut down.

However, mere implementation of the guidelines will not fix the problem. The solution lies in setting up more government colleges. That would arrest the trend of a rising number of candidates vying for a limited number of seats. Although there has been an 82 per cent rise in the number of medical colleges from 387 before 2014 to 706 in early 2024, it is still not enough, given the huge number of candidates and

the fact that many of these institutions are grappling with faculty shortage and infrastructural issues. The rise in the number of institutions also means an increase in the teaching faculty. To address these challenges, the government should not only strengthen the infrastructure and adopt advanced technological interventions but also work to reduce the level of competition in these examinations by creating more employment avenues.

Unemployment needs to be tackled urgently. According to the India Employment Report 2024, the share of youngsters with secondary or higher education in the total unemployed youth has nearly doubled from 35.2 per cent in 2000 to 65.7 per cent in 2022. Employment opportunities have to be created, as less than 1 per cent of the students qualify for government jobs. This means that the economy has to be opened up. Government jobs are coveted because there are inadequate employment avenues in the private sector, where the lack of job security is another key factor. Incentives must be provided for the creation of private-sector jobs for aspiring candidates. Let's hope the current crisis will prompt much-needed reforms in this sector.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- 1 Robbery on the high seas (6)
- 4 Deceitful person (3-5)
- 9 Negligently inert (6)
- 10 Uncomplimentary criticism (8)
- 12 Egress (4)
- 13 Strained (5)
- 14 Merriment (4)
- 17 One who talks too much (12)
- 20 Incredible (6,6)
- 23 Peak (4)
- 24 Take without right (5)
- 25 Predisposition (4)
- 28 Autocrat (8)
- 29 Deep shade of blue (6)
- 30 Wolfgram (8)
- 31 Optimistic (6)

### DOWN

- 1 Casual onlooker (6-2)
- 2 Act of retaliation (8)
- 3 Insincere moral talk (4)
- 5 Achieves remarkable results (5,7)
- 6 Stable gear (4)
- 7 Able to move freely (6)
- 8 Preferably (6)
- 11 Stern unsympathetic nature (5,2,5)
- 15 Peer Gynt's author (5)
- 16 Exorbitant (5)
- 18 Causing disagreement (8)
- 19 Branch (8)
- 21 Brigand (6)
- 22 Guiding light (6)
- 26 Be accepted as adequate (4)
- 27 Break suddenly (4)

### Yesterday's solution

**Across:** 1 Exact, 4 Transit, 8 Pit, 9 Repugnant, 10 Who's who, 11 Lower, 13 Reason, 15 Preach, 18 Hitch, 19 Artisan, 21 Battleaxe, 23 Has, 24 Tenuous, 25 Dotty.

**Down:** 1 Empower, 2 Astronaut, 3 Throw, 4 Tiptoe, 5 Angular, 6 Spa, 7 Tutor, 12 What's what, 14 Othello, 16 Honesty, 17 Harass, 18 Habit, 20 Tread, 22 Tin.

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| 7 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 9 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 5 |
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## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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## CALENDAR

**AUGUST 3, 2024, SATURDAY**

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Shravan Shaka 12
- Shravan Parvishte 19
- Hijari 1446
- Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 3.51 pm
- Vajra Yoga up to 11.01 am
- Punar Nakshatra up to 11.59 am
- Moon in Cancer sign

## FORECAST

| SUNSET:    | SATURDAY | 19:34 HRS |
|------------|----------|-----------|
| SUNRISE:   | SUNDAY   | 05:43 HRS |
| CITY       | MAX      | MIN       |
| Chandigarh | 34       | 28        |
| New Delhi  | 34       | 26        |
| Amritsar   | 34       | 27        |
| Bathinda   | 35       | 24        |
| Jalandhar  | 34       | 27        |
| Ludhiana   | 34       | 26        |
| Bhivani    | 34       | 29        |
| Hisar      | 34       | 26        |
| Sirsa      | 34       | 28        |
| Dharamsala | 29       | 20        |
| Manali     | 26       | 17        |
| Shimla     | 25       | 17        |
| Srinagar   | 27       | 20        |
| Jammu      | 29       | 24        |
| Kargil     | 31       | 18        |
| Leh        | 31       | 15        |
| Dehradun   | 32       | 24        |
| Mussoorie  | 23       | 17        |



Victory for marginalised voices

It is not very often that political parties in India, across the ideological spectrum, find themselves in complete agreement on a given issue. The demand for sub-classification of Scheduled Castes for the purpose of reservations is one such rare instance where there is a political consensus. However, the issue was hanging fire for decades though parties, cutting across political lines, threw their weight behind the agitation, spearheaded by the Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS), seeking categorisation to ensure that the quota benefits reached the underprivileged groups within the SC community. With the Supreme Court's landmark ruling, empowering the States to take up sub-classification of SCs and STs on the basis of scientific data on socio-economic backwardness, the curtains have finally come down on the issue. A seven-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice DY Chandrachud, in a majority 6-1 judgement, held that further sub-classification of SCs and STs by States can be permitted to ensure the grant of quota to more backward castes inside these groups. It essentially means that the SCs do not constitute a socially homogeneous class and there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. It is rightly hailed as a victory for the marginalised sections among the SC and ST communities. Now, the challenge for the States is to finetune their policies of affirmative action to ensure that the benefits of reservation percolate down to the poorest of the poor.

The SC verdict will help fine-tune policies of social justice in an era where affirmative action faces an onslaught

They must initiate the 'quota within quota' exercise in a rational and calibrated manner on the basis of a comprehensive socioeconomic survey. Though political and electoral considerations might come into play, the governments need to strike a fine balance between competing claims. Addressing the inadequacy of representation of certain sub-categories can pave the way for their much-needed uplift. It is hoped that the States will make earnest efforts to remove intra-quota imbalances and disparities. The apex court's historic judgement would help fine-tune the policies of social justice in an era where the very idea of affirmative action faces an onslaught. The verdict overturned the same court's 2004 ruling that the SC/ST list is a "homogenous group" that cannot be divided further. This final judgement may also have a ripple effect and nudge State governments to conduct a survey of Backward Classes. Over the years, some groups within the SC list have been underrepresented compared to others. In the past, attempts were made to extend more protection to these groups, but the issue ran into legal quagmire. Madigas are the largest among the 59 SC sub-castes in Telangana followed by the Malas. According to estimates of the previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government, SCs make up around 19% of the State's population. According to the 2011 Census, the MRPS claims the SC population in the State to be 54.32 lakh, of which Madigas make up 32.22 lakh while 15.27 lakh are Malas.



GAURAV GOGOI Assam Congress MP

The design, construction, and facilities within the new Indian parliament need to be reviewed. ... The Parliament belongs to the people of India and not to one party or one individual



MAMATA THAKUR TMC MP

No citizen should be served with conditions to pursue a life of peace in this country. We stand for unconditional, natural citizenship. We are against making citizens show any unnatural paper for that



SANATH JAYASURIYA Interim coach, Sri Lanka

We have to take the criticism as well, as a coach, as a support staff, as a team. I had to go through this (phase) in my time as a cricketer. When criticism comes, you have to take it

Wake-up call from Wayanad

Wayanad tragedy yet again calls for urgent restructuring of development strategies to better preserve the ecological integrity



P K JOSHI

Landslides in Wayanad are part of a recurring pattern of disasters in Kerala, a State that has long been prone to such events. Notably, it suffered its most severe flood in over a century in 2018, which tragically resulted in the death of at least 489 people and displaced over a million to emergency shelters. Subsequent landslides in 2019, 2021 and 2022 continually challenged the State, highlighting the critical interplay between natural forces and regional development practices.

Repeated Warnings Kerala is known for its rich biodiversity, being a crucial part of the Western Ghats, a renowned biodiversity hotspot. However, this ecologically rich area is increasingly threatened by intense human activities such as overgrazing, rampant deforestation and mining. These pressures on the environment have not gone unnoticed. In 2011, the Madhav Gadgil report sounded an alarm about these ecological vulnerabilities, advocating for strict regulations on development activities to preserve the region's eco-sensitivity. Following this, the High-Level Working Group, also known as the Kasturirangan Committee in 2013, proposed a more balanced approach, although still emphasising significant restrictions, including a complete prohibition on mining and quarrying in protected zones.

A study by IIT Delhi highlighted that Wayanad falls under a 'High to Very High' risk category for landslides, recommending proactive evacuation measures to mitigate potential disasters. According to the India State of Forest Report (2021), over half of the geographic area of the State is forested with one-third as recorded forest area, and a comparable portion consists of

hills and mountains with slopes that exceed 10-15 degrees. Unfortunately, this verdant terrain is under threat due to the erosion of green cover for purposes such as tourism and infrastructure development, which has heightened the susceptibility to landslides.

Ill-planned Development The State's approach to development has often been ill-planned and non-conservative, contributing to a significant increase in vulnerability. Since 2015, these practices have positioned the State as having the highest number of major landslides recorded in the country. Further emphasising this risk, the Landslide Atlas prepared by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) identifies Wayanad district as one of the top 15 regions most prone to such disasters. The districts of Idukki and Kottayam share comparable geographical features and face analogous risks. This situation calls for urgent re-evaluation and restructuring of land use and development strategies to better preserve the ecological integrity of these areas and safeguard the lives and properties of their residents. The entire country, and indeed much of the world, has been experiencing erratic and above-average rainfall recently, a trend largely attributed to climate change. The Western Ghats have been particularly affected due to the warming of the Arabian Sea, which has led to the formation of deep cloud systems and thermodynamically unstable conditions. Recently, this region witnessed a cloudburst-like situation, with an extraordinary 372 mm of rainfall recorded over a 24-hour period. In the early hours of July 30, the village of Mepaddi experienced a significant landslide, triggered by a combination of rock and soil slippage. By 4 am, similar phenomena struck areas such as Mundakkai, Chooralmala, Attamala and Noolpuzha. These events resulted in widespread destruction, affecting thousands of lives, damaging infrastructure and resulting in the loss of hundreds of human lives (still counting). The excessive rainfall exacerbated the already fragile ecology of the region, despite prior warnings from the India Meteorological Department about the potential rain-induced landslides.

logical Department about the potential rain-induced landslides.

Although the State has a dedicated Disaster Management Authority, there appears to be a significant gap in understanding the potential paths these landslides might take, as well as a lack of a comprehensive landslide mitigation plan. This oversight highlights the urgent need for enhanced predictive and preventative strategies to better manage the geological vulnerabilities of the region and safeguard its inhabitants.

In the past, India predominantly relied on a reactive, rescue-centric approach to disasters. However, recent advancements have dramatically transformed its disaster response capabilities with the capacity to forecast events leading to disasters up to a week in advance. This state-of-the-art system places India among an elite group of four countries that can provide real-time updates on rainfall, heatwaves, cyclones, storms and lightning.

For instance, the integration of improved Earth Observation systems and modelling techniques has enabled the accurate tracking and real-time reporting of cyclone landfalls. This critical information is promptly disseminated to affected areas and is also made available on various websites in advance paving the way for India to adopt a 'zero casualty' policy in disaster management. Using such available information and equipping vulnerable areas with a network of in-situ sensors can significantly enhance our ability to identify risks and develop protocols for disseminating warnings to the relevant stakeholders and the public.

These strategies must include creating both in-house emergency response teams and securing robust support

Landscapes such as the Western Ghats and the Himalayas, known for their ecological sensitivity, require stringent land use regulations

from federal agencies, specifically tailored for scenarios. These measures should be integral components of comprehensive emergency response plans that are to be regularly reviewed, re-developed and practised. Also, these high-risk areas should be targeted for regular training sessions and drills to empower communities living there.

Land Use Regulations Landscapes such as the Western Ghats and the Himalayas require stringent land use regulations to promote sustainable practices. It is crucial to implement extra measures for reforestation and soil conservation in these fragile environments to mitigate the risks and disasters. Development projects in these areas must prioritise resilient infrastructure that incorporates an understanding of disaster-forming processes into the design of such projects.

Beyond engineering solutions, ecosystem-based approaches and nature-based solutions are vital for reinforcing slopes and stabilising the ground. Driving these initiatives forward will require a concerted effort to enhance research efforts that leverage state-of-the-art technology while also respecting and incorporating traditional knowledge systems. This dual approach will ensure that both community and state systems are well-equipped to handle the complexities of landslide management effectively.

Landscapes with inherent vulnerabilities are likely to experience more intense and frequent disturbances due to disruptions in biogeochemical cycles caused by global climate change. The recent experience at the Silkyara Bend-Barkot tunnel in the Himalayas serves as a compelling example, showcasing a post-disaster response model that successfully brought together all relevant management stakeholders to address the challenges posed by such events. Implementing integrated approaches as part of pre-disaster activities can significantly enhance our preparedness and response capabilities.

The conservation and management of the environment are crucial not only for the immediate benefits they provide but also for the long-term sustainability of these ecologically fragile and vulnerable regions. These events are the alarms nature is demonstrating its resilience and its capacity to rebound from human-induced stresses.

For humanity, the priority must be to safeguard lives while respecting and preserving the natural world, ensuring that our actions contribute to sustainable development and effective governance. This approach not only helps in managing immediate disaster risks but also contributes to building a resilient society that can thrive in harmony with its environment.

(The author is Professor with the School of Environmental Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Comments are personal opinion)

Letters to the Editor

Iran-Israel The assassination of Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran adds another layer of complexity to the turmoil in West Asia. The assassination comes at a time when tensions have been rising between Israel and Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon. If Israel and Hezbollah skirmishes break out into open war, it could make the ongoing conflict and casualties in Gaza seem like a smaller tragedy, as difficult as it is to imagine that. Unlike Gaza, as tragic as the human cost is, the global economy will get a big shock if there's a full-on

war between Iran and Israel. The Benjamin Netanyahu government, seemingly immune to international pressure, is playing a maximalist game that makes a negotiated peace a more distant possibility. Netanyahu must realise that there are no winners in this war. N SADHASIVA REDDY, Bengaluru

Follow rules As the Western Ghats is an ecologically sensitive zone and a recipe for disaster, it has become far more important to protect forests and mountains. The inaction of the government on the reports of experts to strictly adhere to guidelines given by them has led to the catastrophe. This is no time to indulge in a blame-game. KR SRINIVASAN, Secunderabad

Cartoon Today



India in the hotspot

- The New York Times Riding with trucker, ...past, potential Ragib Khan is a man of impeccable patience. On a sweltering morning in Haryana, he climbed into the cab of his 10-wheel tractor-trailer, started the engine and rumbled slowly onto the highway. The Guardian 'Nobody knows what I know' Running a finger over a row of books in a Delhi library, I stopped at a title that promised danger. On its front was the full title, In the Belly of the Beast: The Hindu Supremacist RSS and the BJP of India, An Insider's View. Newsweek

India's Maritime Imperative In recent months, the Indian Navy has distinguished itself through anti-piracy operations in the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and Gulf of Aden, taking the lead against regional threats like resurgent Somali piracy.

# The Statesman

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## Healthcare Synergy

India's healthcare landscape, marked by the ambitious Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY), aims to provide universal health coverage to millions. Yet, despite its noble intent and expansive reach, the scheme faces significant challenges, particularly concerning private sector engagement. With only 30 per cent of the nation's 43,000 private hospitals empanelled under PMJAY, the programme's effectiveness remains constrained. This situation calls for innovative policy measures, particularly tax-based incentives, to bolster private sector participation and ensure the scheme's success. A critical aspect of PMJAY's current shortfall is the insufficient number of empanelled hospitals. This inadequacy is pronounced in several states, with a concerning disparity in the availability of healthcare providers per lakh beneficiaries. States like Bihar and Maharashtra lag significantly behind, underscoring a systemic issue that hinders the equitable distribution of healthcare services. The reluctance of private hospitals to join PMJAY is often attributed to financial concerns, notably pending dues from government schemes. This persistent issue not only discourages participation but also impacts the quality and accessibility of healthcare services. To address these challenges, the government must adopt a more proactive approach by introducing tax-based incentives for private hospitals willing to empanel under PMJAY. A modest tax rebate, for instance, could serve as a powerful motivator, encouraging more private entities to participate in the scheme. This strategy is not without precedent. Countries like Egypt have successfully implemented similar measures, offering tax exemptions to private hospitals that provide free beds, thereby ensuring broader healthcare access. Such incentives can create a win-win situation, where private hospitals benefit financially while contributing to the public health infrastructure. Furthermore, the government could explore policies that allow private hospitals to use pending dues as collateral for bank loans. This approach would provide immediate financial relief and encourage hospitals to stay engaged with PMJAY, enhancing the scheme's stability and reliability. Another potential solution is to expand the Digital Health Incentives Scheme (DHIS), which rewards private facilities for creating and linking digital health records. By integrating similar incentives into PMJAY, the government can promote the adoption of digital health technologies, improving service delivery and patient outcomes. Expanding PMJAY to include senior citizens, as promised, further accentuates the need for robust private sector participation. This demographic is particularly vulnerable, with higher healthcare needs and a greater prevalence of pre-existing conditions. Without sufficient private hospital involvement, the scheme may struggle to provide adequate care, leading to situations where beneficiaries are left searching for facilities that accept their health cards. This scenario underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach that combines policy innovation with practical incentives. The Union Budget 2024, while progressive in many areas, missed a crucial opportunity to enhance PMJAY's reach and efficacy through such tax-based incentives. As India prepares for future healthcare challenges, it is imperative to prioritise strategies that foster private sector collaboration. By doing so, the government can ensure that PMJAY not only meets its current goals but also evolves into a sustainable and inclusive healthcare model.

## Rate Cut Hint

As the US Federal Reserve approaches its next policy meeting in September, the prospect of an interest rate cut looms large. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell has signalled that if current economic trends continue, a reduction in rates could be on the table. This potential pivot marks a significant moment in the Fed's on-going battle with inflation, and it raises crucial questions about the broader implications for the American economy. The Fed's decision to maintain the benchmark interest rate in the 5.25-5.50 per cent range while softening its stance on inflation and employment risks reflects a delicate balancing act. Inflation has shown signs of easing, with the personal consumption expenditures price index rising at a slower pace than in previous months. This "quality" disinflation, as Mr Powell describes it, is a positive development. However, the Fed must tread carefully to avoid prematurely declaring victory over inflation. The possibility of a rate cut in September is tantalising for investors and borrowers alike. Lower rates could stimulate economic activity by making borrowing cheaper, potentially boosting consumer spending and business investments. Yet, this move is not without its risks. Cutting rates too soon or too aggressively could reignite inflationary pressures, undermining the progress made over the past two years. It is a decision fraught with complexities, particularly with the US Presidential election just around the corner. Critics argue that a rate cut in September, so close to the elections, could be seen as politically motivated. Republican lawmakers have already expressed concerns that such a move could be perceived as an attempt to bolster economic sentiment ahead of the vote. Mr Powell, however, has been unequivocal in his stance that the Fed's decisions are driven solely by economic data, not political considerations. This commitment to data-driven policy making is crucial for maintaining the Fed's credibility and independence. The Fed's ultimate goal is to achieve a "soft landing" - a scenario where inflation returns to the 2 per cent target without causing significant harm to the labour market. The latest data suggests that this outcome is within reach, with the economy continuing to expand at a solid pace and the unemployment rate remaining relatively low. However, the jobless rate has been rising, highlighting the on-going tension between managing inflation and supporting employment. The coming weeks will be critical for the Fed as it monitors economic indicators to inform its next steps. Investors are already anticipating a rate cut, with market reactions reflecting this expectation. However, Mr Powell has cautioned that a substantial cut, such as 50 basis points, is not currently under active consideration. This measured approach underscores the Fed's cautious stance in navigating the complex economic landscape. Mr Powell's commitment to data-driven decisions provides reassurance, but the path ahead remains uncertain. As the September meeting approaches, all eyes will be on the Fed to see how it navigates these challenges and steers the US economy towards a stable future.

# Silver Separators

Several factors contribute to the rise of grey divorces. One of the most prominent is the emphasis on personal happiness and self-fulfilment which has gained traction over the past few decades. As life expectancy increases, many older adults reevaluate their relationships, questioning if they want to spend their extended golden years in an unfulfilling partnership



In recent years, the trend of "grey divorce" - or divorce "among older couples" - has been on the rise. This trend has been the subject of much discussion and analysis, as it is a departure from the traditional understanding of divorce, which has typically been associated with younger couples. Rather than celebrating silver anniversaries, several couples in their 50s or above are going in for 'silver separation'.

With grown-up children leaving home, retirement looming large and the empty nest syndrome hitting home, a rising number of couples are choosing to lead a life of emotional fulfilment - in their individual spaces.

The grounds claimed for grey divorces include being fed up with prolonged torture, taunts, not getting respect, and others. Many adults feel that their marriages have differences, but due to social obligations and other issues, they maintain the connection with their partner.

However, after reaching old age, on looking back, they feel the relationships were full of abuse, nagging, loneliness, hard to understand, full of traumatic events, and lack of respect and values.

What was once a hard choice after years - even decades - together, is now becoming an option that people are thinking about. In the last 10 years, the percentage of older divorce cases has almost doubled in India.

In these times, terms like 'personal happiness', 'personal space' and 'peace of mind' have become important life goals. Without the distractions of work and children, these things become more apparent to couples who do not have any shared interests, children apart. While uncommon in India, the prevalence of 'Grey Divorce' is increasing in the United States.

In the shastras marriage was viewed as a sacrament. The relationship of husband and wife, once established through proper customs and rituals, was believed to be irrevocable.

Marriage is an important social event from which a per-

son starts his/her union. Marriage can protect mental health by giving people a greater sense of emotional support and care in their lives and allowing them to fill multiple social roles.

Married people have higher levels of psychological and physical well-being than individuals who are single, separated or divorced. In India, marriage is the institution through which society provides legitimacy and ensures the smooth functioning of a family. Societal sanctions and norms are transmitted through family members from generation to generation with various additions and deductions according to the belief systems of the era in which the society exists.

One of the marked demographic trends observed in the 20th century is increased rate of divorce and changing marriage patterns. Urbanization, industrialization and education lead to a change in society, family structure and preoccupation of women in the labour force which helps them come out of unhappy marriages.

Married persons are generally more secure and protected and they usually lead a more sober life than those who are unmarried. All these factors are thought to contribute to lower mortality rates among married persons. But marriage is no longer a sacred word and divorce no longer a taboo. With the passage of time a large number of Indians opting for divorces.

Several factors contribute to the rise of grey divorces. One of the most prominent is the emphasis on personal happiness and self-fulfilment which has gained traction over the past few decades.

As life expectancy increases, many older adults reevaluate their relationships, questioning if they want to spend their extended golden years in an unfulfilling partnership.

Changes in societal roles have also played a part. With more women entering the workforce and achieving financial independence, the traditional dynamics of marriage have been challenged. The concept of staying in a marriage due to financial dependency is becoming outdated.

Furthermore, life transitions such as the "empty nest" syndrome, where children leave home, often lead couples to

reevaluate their relationship. With the daily responsibilities of parenting out of the way, many couples confront the reality of their compatibility or lack thereof. This introspection, combined with societal acceptance of divorce, has made it easier for older couples to part ways in search of individual happiness and growth.

The grey divorce trend is not exclusive to a single country. Countries like Canada, the UK, Japan, Europe, Australia, and India are witnessing similar patterns. Terms such as "silver splitters" in the UK and "Retired Husband Syndrome" in Japan highlight the global resonance of this phenomenon.

These international trends underscore that the re-evaluation of marital relationships in later life is not just a cultural shift but a global one.

Second marriages have a unique place in the grey divorce narrative. Interestingly, couples who embark on a second marital journey are up to 2.5 times more likely to face another divorce compared to those in their first marriages.

The reasons can be multifaceted. Some couples, having already experienced the process of divorce, might have fewer reservations about doing it again.

Additionally, shorter marriages later in life, often resulting from second or third unions, tend to be more susceptible to dissolution. The complexities of

blending families, managing combined assets, and navigating past traumas can also add strain to these unions.

Divorce, regardless of age, can be emotionally taxing. However, for older adults, the psychological implications can be particularly profound. Many grapple with feelings of loneliness, especially if they have been in a partnership for decades. There is also the challenge of redefining one's identity outside the context of a marital union.

On the flip side, staying in an unhappy marriage can have detrimental health effects. Chronic stress, often stemming from marital discord, has been linked to a host of health issues, from heart disease to depression.

As the saying goes, "It's not the years in your life, but the life in your years." For many, the pursuit of personal happiness and well-being in their later years outweighs the societal pressures of staying in an unsatisfying marriage.

The grey divorce revolution represents more than a passing societal trend; it reflects our modern world's shifting values, priorities, and evolving definitions of life's stages.

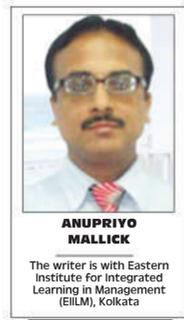
As the traditional boundaries of marriage change, older adults are boldly advocating for their right to happiness, fulfilment, and personal evolution, even if it means ending a decades-long relationship.

Divorce, especially in the later stages of life, is a profound and multifaceted decision. It is critical to embark on this journey with comprehensive information, solid support, and a clear understanding.

Consultation with an experienced divorce attorney can provide invaluable insights, ensuring that one's rights and interests are protected.

Along with seeking legal advice, looking into support groups or engaging in introspection can help with the transition.

Finally, the path to closing one chapter and beginning another after divorce can be a transformative experience filled with empowerment, growth, and a fresh sense of purpose.



ANUPRIYO MALICK

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

## Our heritage

SIR, This has a reference to the article "Preserving Heritage" by Sachchidanand Joshi (July 31). India is home to a wealth of lesser-known heritage sites that, despite lacking UNESCO recognition, hold immense historical, cultural, and aesthetic significance.

These sites, often overshadowed by more famous landmarks, offer unique insights into India's diverse past and rich traditions. For instance, the Bishnupur temples in West Bengal

showcase exquisite terracotta art, while the ruins of Hampi in Karnataka reveal the grandeur of the Vijayanagara Empire. Such sites are vital for understanding regional histories and the evolution of art and architecture in India, reflecting the country's multifaceted cultural heritage.

Their stories contribute to a more comprehensive narrative of India's civilization, highlighting local achievements and cultural practices. However, the lack of

recognition and attention means these sites often suffer from neglect, inadequate preservation efforts, and limited tourism infrastructure. Without the spotlight of global awareness, they are vulnerable to decay and encroachment. Preservation of these sites is crucial, not just for their intrinsic value but also for fostering a deeper appreciation of India's extensive heritage beyond the well-trodden paths.

Enhancing awareness, securing funding for conservation, and promoting responsible tourism can ensure these lesser-known sites receive the attention and care they deserve, thus preserving India's rich and diverse historical tapestry for future generations. Ensuring their protection would also promote cultural pride and education among local communities, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards heritage conservation.

Yours, etc.,  
Narayanan Kizhummundayur,



## DEATH TRAPS

SIR, It is only after the tragic death of three bright, young and ambitious students in Delhi that the horrible condition of a well-known and reputed coaching centre in India's capital has come into the public domain. However, the fact remains that coaching centers pan India ply their teaching/coaching business in much the same way.

If a coaching centre that is much sought after was potentially a death trap, the condition of hundreds of other such centres can well be imagined.

As in the case of other avoidable man-invited accidents, those responsible will most likely go scot free owing to their political connections and financial clout. Also, the tragic deaths have triggered a political blame game that can only be described as rubbing salt on the wounds of the near and dear ones of the deceased.

One thing is very clear from the above tragedy - coaching centres have now become coaching centers whose raison d'être is the students' crazy ambition to succeed and their willingness to shell out exorbitant amounts even if their lives are in jeopardy.

The manner in which authorities have been passing the buck shows how cheap human life has become in India. How ironic that India's capital city is the hotbed of corruption and bureaucratic insensitivity.

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole,  
Dewas, 1 August.

A MEMBER OF THE

ANN  
ASIA NEWS NETWORK

## ASIAN VOICES

### Women and tokenism

The new coalition government, led by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, faced a huge public backlash when it appointed only two women and not a single Dalit in the 22-member Council of Ministers. The same government, however, garnered praise in a matter of days when Prime Minister Oli appointed Lila Devi Badtula as the Nepal government's first female Chief Secretary.

While undeniably historic in a country where men are at the forefront of leadership positions, it is difficult to ignore the political context surrounding Badtula's selection, which came amid a public outcry over the severe underrepresentation of women in the Cabinet. Her appointment at the end of her career and only when former chief secretary Baikuntha Aryal was suspended - outgoing Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal had appointed Badtula an acting chief secretary on July 15 - is suggestive of the disregard for having women in top positions when men are around. This raises questions about whether Badtula's promotion was no more than a tactical move to quell public discontent.

The prime minister, silent about the biases in Cabinet, boasted on Facebook on Saturday, "I saw many friends writing about Nepali women who have reached high leadership positions on social media yesterday. I am also pleased with these four coincidences that became possible under my positive initiative".

The pictures showed the first female President, Bidhya Devi Bhandari;

## THE KATHMANDU POST

the first female Chief Justice, Sushila Karki; the first woman speaker in the House of Representatives, Onsari Gharti; and Badtula - all of whom were appointed during Oli's government leadership at different times. We also have another unforgettable name Sewa Lamsal (the first female foreign secretary), at present.

The world is forging ahead towards gender inclusivity, bringing more women to the fore, be it in politics or administration, and Nepal also seems somewhat committed to it.

The country has significantly improved women's political representation, who now occupy 91 seats in the 275-member federal parliament. And apart from politics, as per the Department of National Personnel Records, out of 85,513 civil service employees, 20.64 per cent are female; seven are secretaries besides the chief secretary.

Even so, genuine gender equality and inclusion is far from ensured. These seemingly "historic" achievements, each carrying the tag "the first woman," however, fail to represent a whole lot of Nepali women.

It is uncertain whether more women will consistently fill the positions left by their 'female firsts'. As concerning is the exclusion of women from marginalised communities in the top roles, where the Khas-Arya dominate.

Things won't improve much unless more women are elected through first-past-the-post or direct elections - in the 2022 elections just nine women were directly elected - and unless women stopped being played as token cards. And this will never come without political leaders' willingness to change. As men dominate Nepali politics, women are "given" positions.

Tokenism will never lead to women's empowerment and equality; it will in fact prove detrimental to the realisation of our gender-equal dreams. True gender equality requires more than symbolic gestures; it demands substantive change in our behaviour in how we treat women both at home and in public positions.

# 'Lotus will be BJP's CM face'

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva has been reaching out to every section of the society in the city, listening to people and raising their concerns. Sachdeva spent his early days in Old Delhi where he attended Commercial School in Darya Ganj. He graduated from Delhi University, and had worked as a journalist in the initial days of his career. The politician has seen the city and its politics changing with time, and throws light on the current situation in an interview with The Statesman's Aagraj Pratap Singh. He claims that in the upcoming Delhi assembly polls, people are likely to opt for BJP's double engine government.

**Q: BJP had a historic win in all seven Lok Sabha seats of Delhi. What was the reason behind this victory?**

A: Without any doubt there are three main reasons behind the historic win of the BJP on all seven Lok Sabha seats of Delhi for the third consecutive time. Firstly it is the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, under whose guidance we are working. The people of Delhi have voted for his work and his name. Secondly, our national president Jagat Prakash Nadda, who works to give energy to every party worker, and the lakhs of party workers who worked meticulously during the 85-day long campaign. And the third reason for the win is that the people of Delhi with all their heart blessed PM Modi and his party.

**Q: It has been seen that people vote for Arvind Kejriwal and his party in Delhi's assembly elections and during the parliamentary polls they vote for the BJP. What is your take on that?**

A: The BJP has been winning in Lok Sabha polls in the capital and AAP in assembly polls in Delhi, it is something that is a part of history now. This time the people of Delhi have made up their mind to reject the corruption of the Aam Aadmi Party. The balloon of AAP's lies has burst, be it their theatrics, deception, be it the liquor scam, Jal Board scam and several other issues like the spike in electricity bills etc. People are fed up of the AAP, as their legislators are facing corruption allegations. Earlier AAP used to blame the MCD for civic

woes, but now they have been in power for a while in the civic body as well, and as one can see that within half an hour of rain, the city faces waterlogging. The drains have not been cleaned, and there is a suspected scam in desilting as well. People have now seen that for the past almost 26 years, AAP and Congress have looted Delhi. Based on people's feedback to our party workers, this time Delhi will have a double-engine government under PM Modi's leadership.

**Q: Talking of your newly elected MPs, with the BJP fielding six fresh faces, what do you have to say about these selections?**

A: The unique factor about our organisation is that no role or responsibility is permanently established for a person or a worker. We are all party workers and from time to time our role keeps changing. Those who were MPs in the past now have a different role, and those who were workers are now parliamentarians. This switch-over of roles and responsibilities motivates all party workers, as they feel they will get a chance to come forward. Talking of the fresh faces, they could be new in the Lok Sabha but they all have great experience. Kamaljeet Sehrawat had served as a Mayor; Yogendra Chandolia was also a Mayor, had been a standing committee chairman and has a lot of experience regarding Delhi; Harsh Malhotra who is now a minister in the central government, has worked amid public; Bansuri Swaraj is a barrister and has been working for the party for a while and Praveen Khandelwal has been a very important leader of Delhi's traders and also has been our party's treasurer. Therefore we feel we have given a chance to such experienced party workers who will serve Delhi very well in times to come.

**Q: Not as a politician, but as a common man, a Delhi'ite, what is the situation of the city, as in were things better earlier in terms of civic woes?**

A: Being a son of Delhi, born and raised in Old Delhi, living in East Delhi for a while, I have seen the changing times in the city, but it pains me to look at the city in the present situation. I can say that there is a need to make it much better. Try to imagine the situation which existed some years ago when the Eastern and Western Expressways had

not been made. Commercial vehicles used to drive past through the city, there would be traffic jams due to trucks, there used to be the smoke emitted by them. Now those heavy vehicles pass by these expressways without entering Delhi, and this convenience is due to Prime Minister Modi. If we look at these things, we can say a lot has been done. However if we look at city's basics and the civic woes, if we look at the civic bodies, there is a lot to be done in terms of basic facilities. Delhi's drains are not clean, as the city faces waterlogging and traffic jams in just 30 minutes of rain. Desilting of drains is the work of the city's civic agency where AAP is in power, and they cannot blame BJP now.

Talking of the garbage mountain, the present AAP government had promised to remove it, but it is there. Pollution is a big problem in the city, we all know that with the onset of winter, pollution will increase. When we talk of the Holy Yamuna, where I used to bathe in my younger days, today one cannot step into the river. It gives me a headache, as crores of rupees given by the Centre have been misplaced due to corruption in the name of cleaning Yamuna. There is a need to work with honest intentions for its improvement.

**Q: What is the vision of your newly elected MPs when we talk of addressing the city's issues like pollution, and how effectively will they raise the city's concerns in Parliament?**

A: Raising issues of the city in Parliament is the role of our MPs and I am sure they will do their work. But the main thing is what is the solution to the issues faced by the city. Whatever has to be done in Delhi, one has to approach the state government.

For example, the Centre gave thousands of crore rupees to Delhi for cleaning of Yamuna. Where did that money go? To the Delhi government. To make the city better a vision is required; all agencies have to work together in close coordination. This is why I appeal to the people of the city that having given 15 years to Congress, and 10 to AAP, this time they should give a chance to the double-engine government of BJP. I can assure that under PM's leadership we can

make Delhi better and the people of the city can be proud of that.

**Q: It has been seen that leaders from other parties in Delhi have joined BJP. Is it a sign that things are changing on the city's political front, and will it benefit BJP in the upcoming elections?**

A: BJP is the world's largest political party and today the entire world respects PM Modi and his leadership. The country's image in the world is now such that everyone is proud of India. Political leaders here also think that they have to work under PM's leadership. When they want to join us we welcome them. We welcome people who come with good intentions.

**Q: Who is going to be the BJP's CM face for Delhi?**

A: In our recent executive committee meeting we have decided our CM face is our symbol, the lotus flower, and we had made this decision public. All workers will contest the election under the symbol, and the BJP will win. Every party worker walking with the symbol will be our CM.

**Q: How has Delhi evolved as a city during the past three decades, also what do you have to say about changing political scenarios here?**

A: I have seen Delhi change with time, there is no doubt in that. In the eighties, every house in my lane was like my own. We could go to any house, sit there, pick up and eat whatever we would want. There would be one telephone in the neighborhood, and when the phone rang, they would ask whose call it is and call the person. One home had a colour TV, and the doors were kept open for neighbours to watch. Sadly that environment hardly exists now. Talking of the political scenario, I have seen times when leaders like Madan Lal Khurana, Vijay Kumar Malhotra, Kedarnath Sahni, Sahib Singh Verma, Sheila Dikshit, Jag Prवेश Chandra, Jai Prakash Aggarwal and several old leaders could be seen at different places in Connaught Place, having discussions, listening to each other. Despite being political opponents they would listen to each other and had mutual respect. This also happened at the national level; if Atal Bihari Bajpai ji said something, Indira Gandhi ji would listen to him. During Sheila ji's



time also, she used to speak to leaders from different political parties. However, after her there has been a vacuum. The situation has deteriorated after the AAP came into the picture. As we used to say Dilli Dilwalo Ki. Those people are still there, but a little scared now, as they feel if they say something they will be labeled and judged. I feel that with politics, we must also keep up with our cultural values, the culture of Delhi's Ganga Jamuni tehzeeb, which is slowly fading.

**Q: What is the PM's vision for Delhi?**

A: PM's vision for Delhi is very straight - that it is the country's capital and must be a developed capital city, and for this he got the Eastern and Western peripheral expressways built, got the Dwarka Expressway and Meerut Expressway made, developed NH 24, got the Kartavya Path made, adding to the city's beauty. He got the National War memorial built and also the National Police Memorial was made with his vision. The PM museum now showcases every former PM, the statue of Subhash Chandra Bose is at India Gate. To make things even better for Delhi at grass root level, the double engine government will be very effective.

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

The death of Mr. Frank Larmour removes a unique personality, in which business acumen, geniality, and real public spirit were most happily blended. As a partner in the famous furnishing house of Lazarus, he took a prominent part in the affairs of the Calcutta. Trades Association, holding the Mastership for more than one term, and representing the Association in the Bengal Legislative Council. He was an enthusiastic Freemason, and among other offices held that of Deputy District Grand Mark Master of Bengal. There were few more popular figures in Calcutta society than Mr. Larmour, whose fifty years' experience of Indian life in all its phases - he knew every Native State and most of the Princes - gave him an exceptionally rich fund of anecdote and reminiscence. Though not an old man as age is reckoned nowadays, and certainly not looking his seventy years, his health had been indifferent for some time prior to his death. He will be missed by many both in India and at Home.

## NEWS ITEMS

### BOMBAY COUNCIL

## HEAVY AGENDA AT THE FORTHCOMING SESSION

A HEAVY agenda will come up for discussion at the forthcoming session of the Bombay Legislative Council at Poona. As many as twelve official and five non-official Bills and one hundred and thirteen resolutions have been tabled for discussion. Among important official Bills are the Children's Protection Bill and Inquiry into and settlement of Trades Dispute Bill.

Non-official Bills include two by Mr. K. E. Nariman and Mr. Joe Addyman in favour of extension of the Rent Act. Dr. Vekkar moves a resolution favouring the lifting of all bans on Mr. Savarkar, while Mr. Lalji Naranji moves for the appointment of a mixed committee to inquire into the Development Department and to suggest whether it could not be merged into the Public Works Department with a view to economy.

### INDIAN COTTON

## DEVELOPING MARKET IN LANCASHIRE

THE Empire Cotton growing Corporation, it appears from the International Cotton Bulletin, is co-operating with the Indian Committee with a view to developing the market for Indian cottons. In Lancashire six varieties already well-known on the Liverpool market are being subjected to commercial spinning tests.

The raw cottons and yarns produced from them will, it is hoped, be exhibited in Lancashire together with the results of the tests made on each. Bales of other types believed to be suitable to Lancashire's requirements are also on their way from India and it is hoped to deal with those similarly.

By this means spinners will be made more fully aware of the merits of India's better types of cotton and it is hoped that the result will be apparent in their increased consumption so that, as their supply develops, they may be at once absorbed and encouragement thus afforded to increased production.

### LUCKNOW MEETING

## KHILAFAT COMMITTEE'S PROGRAMME OF WORK

A MEETING of the Working Committee of the Central Khilafat Committee, presided over by Mr. Shaukat Ali, was held at Lucknow on July 19 and 20. The meeting was attended by Messrs Mohammad Ali, Abul Kalam Azad, Shaukat Ali, Syed Suleiman Nadi, Mahmood, Shaahib Querishi, and Mr. Sherwan Kitblew.

Resolutions were passed thanking His Exalted Highness the Nizam of Hyderabad for the financial assistance he has promised to the ex-Khalif Abdul Mejid, and deciding to take in hand the following programme immediately (1) Maintenance, relief, and education of Moplah orphans and widows, (2) reorganization of Khilafat volunteer corps (3) reorganization of district, tehsil, and village Khilafat Committees throughout India (4) opening of primary schools in mosques and establishment of night schools (5) repairs of mosques and organization of Juma and similar congregational prayers, (6) establishment of panchayets for settlement of disputes out of course, (7) raising of funds to give effect to reorganization programme by putting collection boxes at every Muslim shop, by organizing monthly shop subscription and by obtaining chutki or muthia contributions from all Mussulmans.

To give effect to the proposals the members of the Committee would make a tour throughout the country.

# Being counted as an Asian-American

GRACE KAO

The United States is a land of immigrants, with many racial and ethnic groups. How the US government counts them changes regularly, and the latest revisions affect all minority groups, including Asian-Americans. For immigrants to the US, it is often a shocking transition as they are identified via the racial categories in the US.

Certainly, for new arrivals from Korea, China, India, the Philippines and other countries in Asia, it's not obvious why we/they are categorized under the pan-ethnic group "Asian or Asian Americans." However, there is a history behind these racial categorisations, and the US Census (actually the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB) has continuously revised these categories to reflect the current population and context of the US.

The new revisions from March 2024 from OMB encourage the official data collection of race and ethnicity to have one combined question that asks respondents to select as many of the following categories as they wish: (1) American Indian or Alaskan Native; (2) Asian; (3) Black or African American; (4) Hispanic or Latino; (5) Middle Eastern or North African; (6) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; and (7) White.

The question about Hispanic/Latino origin is now asked in the same race question - previously officials argued that Hispanics can be of any race, so the question "Are you of His-

panic/Latino origin" was asked in a separate question. Another major shift is that Middle Eastern or North African is no longer combined with the white category, reflecting the growth of Americans from those geographic regions.

Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander was earlier combined with Asian American (you may have seen the term AAPI, which stands for Asian American/Pacific Islander). In fact, May still represents AAPI or APA Heritage Month in the US.

Moreover, federal and state agencies are now encouraged to include questions about race/ethnicity that go beyond the pan-ethnic labels. In other words, instead of having "Asian or Asian American," they are encouraged to include categories like "Chinese," "Filipino," "Korean," etc. For those of you who are not social scientists, you might wonder why we didn't do this before. Let me explain.

The US Constitution requires a count of the US population in a decennial census beginning in 1790. At first, it only distinguished the racial categories (1) free white males; (2) free white females; (3) all other free persons; and (4) slaves. It was not until 1870 that we began tracking individuals of any Asian ancestry when we added the category, "Chinese." In 1882, the US passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the first to exclude an immigrant group based solely on national origin. In the 1880 Census, we added the category, "Japanese." However, by 1907-08, the

US and Japan jointly passed the Gentlemen's Agreement, which restricted immigration from Japan to the US.

The US then passed the Immigration Act of 1917 or the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, which restricted immigration from countries "not possessed by the United States adjacent to the continent of Asia," including much of Asia and the Pacific islands. This act added the following categories of people to Asians: "All idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons; persons who have had one or more attacks of insanity at any time previously; persons of constitutional psychopathic inferiority; persons with chronic alcoholism; paupers..." By 1920, the US Census added the ethnic categories: (1) Filipino; (2) Korean; and (3) Hindu to its Asian categories.

By 1921 and later 1924, the US passed additional immigration laws that restricted (but did not eliminate) the numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe by establishing quotas based on earlier census counts. The passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act or Hart-Celler Act reopened borders to immigrants without targeting a specific country by name (although America still differentiated between the Western and Eastern hemispheres).

The term "Asian American" came out of political struggles in the 1960s as part of the Civil Rights Movement. At San Francisco State University (then San Francisco State College) and the University of California, Berkeley,

minority students engaged in Third World Liberation Front strikes to demand that courses recognize the histories of non-European countries and peoples (the precursors to Ethnic Studies). At the same time, historian-activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee started using the term Asian American to signify a unified political alliance of Americans of Asian descent. Because immigration from China and Japan had largely ended by the 1920s, those who were here in the 1960s were second generation - meaning they were born in the US of immigrant parents. They identified fully as Americans whose native language was English. The total Asian-American population in 1960 was just under 1 million, while the total US population was 179 million. This means Asians comprised just 0.55 per cent of the total population in 1960.

It was not just an issue of size that made it logical to use an umbrella term. By dint of immigration laws, Asians had been lumped together. Hate crime cases such as the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American auto worker who was killed in Detroit because two unemployed white men were angry about the influx of Japanese cars. Most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many Asian Americans found themselves bearing the brunt of blame for the crisis. These experiences made it clear to Asian-Americans that whether we like it or not, the fates of Asian-Americans are bound to one another.

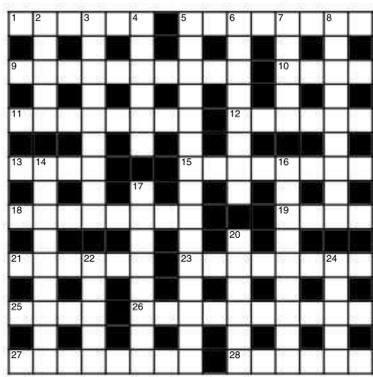
Still, the Asian-American population in the US is more diverse than ever. We now number 24 million, or about 6 per cent of the US population. We come from a large number of groups. Six groups - Chinese, South-Asian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean and Japanese - make up about 85 per cent of the population, with another 15 groups that comprise no more than 2 per cent of the Asian population. Asian national-origin groups also have very different levels of educational and income backgrounds, which makes it important to differentiate between them. Most Indians in the US are college-educated, but only a small percentage of Hmong immigrants have college degrees. However, if we did not aggregate to an Asia pan-ethnic label, it's likely that policymakers and the media would be less interested in differentiating among the over 20 largest Asian groups. For most of its history in the US, it was better to be counted together than to be ignored.

When I was studying sociology at UC Berkeley in the 1980s (where the strikes occurred), it was still rare for me to read about Asian-Americans. The world was still described in black and white, so I was grateful to study Asian-Americans starting in graduate school. For me, the Asian-American identity will always resonate. I hope new immigrants, including those from Korea, will also understand why it is important to be counted as Asian-American.

The Korea Herald/ANN.

## CROSSWORD

NO-292863



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

A A S M B P S  
I N D U S T R I A L L O P E  
T T A D O E I  
R E S O R T D E C A D E N T  
C I L G D  
U S E R O V E R T H E T O P  
W A N O U T O C  
C E N T R E O F G R A V I T Y  
E R T T I O  
A P O C R Y P H A L G O R E  
S L E E N  
S T R A N G E R D R E A R Y  
A M A O T O  
S K I M S T A R V A T I O N  
E Y P D E E T

### ACROSS

- Prepares last portions of chips and fish with mushy peas (6)
- Help politician to conceal British tale of woe (5,5)
- Maybe pancake with essentially watery filling is uninspired (4-6)
- Teacher's anguish (4)
- Book again - including a little champagne flute (8)
- Win gold for coach (6)

- Consume sport (4)
- Cassette re-established legal precedent (4,4)
- Good nutrient halved in Dr Pepper (8)
- Regularly ignored fungal yeast's beginning to be unsightly (4)
- Young horse scratching a short tail (6)
- Friend might - in extremis - greet naked dates found here? (4,4)
- Almost destroy new oven (4)

- Snooty one in popular comedy ultimately putting sex appeal into play (5-5)
- ... short play, good in points and theatre's booming (8)
- Liberal Party Housing Spokesperson Finally makes room (6)

### DOWN

- Lethal venom bottles split into two (5)
- Spray, tip or pour mixture (9)

- Tatty, blingy daughters take wife's place (6)
- Settled wee kitty moving in and there's no room for any more at this juncture (10,5)
- Be grateful for entertaining cricket game - it's unreal (8)
- Can touring artist work out (5)
- Reading magazine nurse leaves after cycling here (9)

- Leader let independent radio broadcast (9)
- Judge on wretched TV show (9)
- Scatters seeds containing nitrogen with garden implement - it spreads the load on soft ground (8)
- Emphasise trouble (4,2)
- Crease navy sheets (5)
- Join stuck-up priest in bed every now and then (5)

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



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PAPER WITH PASSION

## SC removes creamy layer

The Supreme Court's decision to approve sub-categorisation of SC/STs for reservations will pave the way for greater inclusivity

In a landmark judgment, the Supreme Court has declared that sub-classification within Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is permissible. Justice Pankaj Mithal emphasised that reservations should benefit only the first generation within a category and called for periodic reviews to ensure subsequent generations have reached parity with the general category. This ruling overruled the EV Chinniah case, where the Court had previously held that all castes formed a single homogeneous group that could not be subdivided. This decision has significant implications for the socio-economic upliftment and political representation of these historically marginalised communities. The judgement addresses the issue of the creamy layer within a caste. It is argued that the caste quotas are often usurped by the creamy layer within a caste as some people within a caste are uplifted and have education, means and resources to prevail upon the rest of their ilk. India's Constitution, through Articles 341 and 342, recognises certain communities as marginalised. The government is permitted to make special provisions for the upliftment of these communities which have been historically deprived. These measures include reservations in educational institutions, government jobs, and legislative bodies. Over the years, concerns have been raised regarding the unequal distribution of these benefits. Some sub-castes or sub-tribes within the broader SC/ST categories have been perceived as cornering a disproportionate share of the benefits, leaving others behind. This has led to calls for sub-classification.



The petitioners had argued that such sub-classification would undermine the unity of these communities

and contradict the principles of equality and non-discrimination enshrined in the Constitution. However, the Supreme Court, in its judgment, emphasised that the primary objective of reservation policies is to ensure social and economic justice. By sub-classifying a caste, the government can design more nuanced policies that ensure benefits are equitably distributed among all sub-groups within the SC/ST categories. The decision can also lead to better political representation for sub-groups within SCs and STs. It opens the door for more inclusive policies that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of these communities. However, the Supreme Court's decision may need additional provisions to address several gaps. The concept of the "creamy layer" or privileged group, particularly regarding the second generation, is not clearly defined and is open to interpretation. This lack of clear definition of "creamy layer" makes it subjective and may lead to varying interpretations which may again be challenged in the court. The Supreme Court has left it to the states to define the "creamy layer" for exclusion. It remains to be seen how this decision will be implemented and interpreted by different governments. While the Court has set the stage for a more inclusive and equitable distribution of affirmative action benefits to SC/ST, it may take time to reach the execution stage.

### PICTALK



Devotees stand in queue to offer prayers on the occasion of Shivratri, in New Delhi

PTI

## The rise and impact of political memes in the digital age

The recent surge of memes following President Biden's withdrawal from the race underscores their increasing use for expressing public sentiments

In her book "Memes in Digital Culture," Professor Limor Shifman highlights the significance of political memes, noting that they play a crucial role in shaping discussions about societal norms and the future. The recent surge in memes following U.S. President Joe Biden's decision not to run for the upcoming presidential elections illustrates the increasing use of this medium for expressing public sentiments, including likes, dislikes, and frustrations. The concept of memes dates back to the late 20th century, introduced by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book "The Selfish Gene." Dawkins described memes as cultural units that spread and evolve similarly to genes. The formal introduction of "Internet Memes" occurred in 1994, thanks to Mike Godwin. These early memes, like the "Nazi comparison memes," circulated rapidly online and laid the foundation for the meme culture we know today. The creation and spread of internet memes began in



the 1990s and early 2000s on forums and imageboards like 4chan and Reddit. These platforms were among the first to host meme-like content, such as humorous images with captions and inside jokes. As the internet and social media expanded, so did the reach and diversity of memes, evolving to include various formats like GIFs, videos, and TikToks. Meme-making has become a popular form of self-expression, communication, and connection online. Some even view it as an art form, with certain memes becoming part of mainstream culture. As the U.S. presidential elections approach, the relevance of political memes becomes increasingly significant. The digital age has revolutionized political communication, shifting it from

traditional media to the dynamic realm of social media. This transformation, fueled by internet accessibility and information democratization, has empowered individuals to engage in political dialogue more freely. It is crucial to understand both the profound implications and challenges of this new landscape. Humor, especially through memes, has emerged as a potent tool in this era. Memes distill complex ideas into easily shareable and often humorous content, making them a staple of online political communication. They serve as entertainment and vehicles for critique and satire, simplifying intricate issues and making them more accessible to a broader audience. For example, AI-generated images of Donald Trump at a concert or wordplays like "Joever" and "Kamencing" illustrate how humor is used to navigate serious political situations. The impact of this shift on political campaigns is profound. Today's political actors understand the power of social media in

shaping narratives. The rapid spread and viral potential of online content make social media a crucial battleground for political communication. In this arena, the perceptual environment created by social media often outweighs the significance of the political events themselves. A viral meme about U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris involving a coconut, once used derogatorily, now helps promote her case. Her remark during a widely watched speech, "You exist in the context of all in which you live and what came before you," encapsulates the essence of present-day social media and meme culture. Elections have always been fertile ground for PR stunts, and meme sharing. While there is little evidence to suggest that memes directly impact electoral behavior, they undeniably contribute to digital discourse. Depending on their virality, memes can become part of everyday conversations and even enter mainstream media. (The author is a poetess, journalist and a writer; views are personal)



ARPITA CHOWDHURY

## Kamala emerges as front runner for US Presidency

As the first woman Vice President, Harris is now poised to break another glass ceiling by becoming the first female President of the United States



KALYANI SHANKAR

The US Vice President Kamala Harris ended the week by declaring, "I am Kamala Harris and I am running for President." This historic moment, ending the suspense after President Biden withdrew from the Presidential contest and endorsed her as the candidate, marks a new chapter in American politics. It is now official.

Many influential Democrats, including former Presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, fund giver George Clooney, have thrown their weight behind her candidacy. She now has the Party firmly behind her in her fight, instilling confidence in her potential to lead. It's worth noting that in its 248-year history, the US has never elected a female President. Even Hillary Clinton, who ran for President in 2008 and 2016, was unsuccessful. Kamala made history four years ago when she became the first woman Vice President.

Will she make history again by running for President? Can she win? She has to do two things. First, she needs to get the Democratic Party's nomination, and then she needs to win. Time is short, with only four months left before the election on November 5. Indian-origin Kamala Harris has several strengths and a few weaknesses. Her current position as Vice President and her qualifications to assume the role of President in an emergency are her essential advantages. Four years ago, Kamala hoped Biden would finish one term and say goodbye to the White House. However, Biden stuck to his decision and insisted on running for a second term. But he surprised everyone by recently withdrawing and endorsing his Vice President.

One significant advantage was that she could break the glass ceiling by becoming the first woman president. She must work hard to appeal to Black, Asian, and female voters and gain support from other minority groups and undecided and



younger voters. This could help her chances against Trump in swing states. Secondly, another significant factor in Kamala Harris's favour is her strong connection to Biden's legacy, which is not entirely negative. This association could play a pivotal role in her candidacy. She could bring together moderate and conservative members of her Party and act as a unifying force. To defeat Trump, her Party must unite and support her.

Thirdly, Obama was the first Black President, and John F. Kennedy was the first Catholic President. They could be her role models, inspiring hope in the hearts of many. Fourthly, and importantly, Kamala is 59 years old, which works in her favour compared to Trump, who is 78. Her age is not a drawback, but a substantial age difference could bring about change.

She can attract undecided voters by highlighting her achievements to gain their support. Fifthly, she can have Biden's war chest of about \$100 million. She has raised \$200 million in the first week of her candidacy and signed up 17000 volunteers.



THE RACE FOR PRESIDENT BETWEEN KAMALA HARRIS AND DONALD TRUMP IS CURRENTLY TIED, ACCORDING TO A RECENT POLL BY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. THIS TIE IS SIGNIFICANT. THE POLL SHOWS INCREASED SUPPORT FOR HARRIS AMONG NON-WHITE VOTERS

Still, she must instil confidence in other fundraisers for the enormous poll expenditure. Kamala Harris has strong ties to Silicon Valley since the beginning of her political career.

She is tapping into this support for her battle against Donald Trump. Above all, she must choose the right candidate for her running mate. The right combination should enhance the chances against the Trump-Vance team. Kamala also pledged to do "everything in my power to unite the Democratic Party and our nation, to defeat Donald Trump and his extreme Project 2025 agenda." Harris's mission is urgent and crucial. She must gain the support of those who are uncertain or critical to achieve her goal.

The race for President between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump is currently tied, according to a recent poll by the Wall Street Journal. This tie is significant. The poll shows increased support for Harris among non-white voters and a substantial rise in enthusiasm for the campaign among Democrats. Harris faces challenges such as her past

unsuccessful bid for the 2020 nomination, her approval ratings, and the need to secure significant funding for her campaign.

According to a recent NBC News poll, Trump was ahead of Biden by 45% to 43%, and Trump also led Harris by the same two-point margin of 47% to 45%. But slowly, this is changing. The time is short, as the campaign has just 100 days left. Before the November election, the vice president's team should strategise how to defeat Trump. Trump's team may criticise Harris as inexperienced and risky. She should be ready to face racism from the Trump campaign and run as a Democratic nominee who is a Black and South Asian American woman. This election is a critical decision that will shape America's future. Biden's exit has energised the Democratic. It is up to Kamla to seize the moment to surge forward. Can she step in and be the natural leader in America? Her capacity to lead the next few weeks will show whether she can.

(The writer is a popular columnist, views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### WAYANAD TRAGEDY: FIXING THE BLAME

Madam — Apropos to "CM refutes Shah's alert claim on Wayanad tragedy" published on 1st August, here is my response. One can do very little when mountain ranges receive unexpected & torrential rain like this, as the forecast was for 64-204 mm rain but Wayanad received 372 mm rain on that fateful night. But such events turning into human tragedies can certainly be minimised and prevented.

What is really tragic is the fact that a warning given by the state disaster management authority four years ago was not heeded where 4000 families were asked to leave landslide prone areas including Mundakkai. As recently as on 23rd July Centre also warned Kerala about excessive rainfall or landslides but nothing was taken seriously. In recent past severe deluge leading to flooding caused serious damage in almost each district of the state and Kerala saw statewide floods in 2018 and 2019 but nothing seems to have been done on disaster prevention in hilly areas. Nature has warned us time and again to keep our house in order and maintain an ecological balance, but sadly we are hell bent on playing havoc with nature.

Bal Govind | Noida

#### HALWA POLITICS

Madam — This refers to the editorial, "Halwa politics" (1-8-24). Parliament is a place where meaningful discussions and debates take place to decide the livelihood and the course of the country. Those who are privileged to be a member of the house are supposed to be committed to the national priorities and display their utmost respect to the house, decency and focused attention on the development of the country rather than focusing on personal agenda. The ruling dispensation is supposed to give due respect to all the members and all the parties in the house as they are also elected representatives of the people. The leader of the opposition talks

#### World breast feeding week



The World Breastfeeding Week, observed in the first week of August annually and supported by WHO, UNICEF, and various Ministries of Health and civil society partners, carries the theme "Closing the gap: Breastfeeding support for all" for 2024. The campaign aims to

celebrate the diverse experiences of breastfeeding mothers throughout their journeys while highlighting the crucial role families, societies, communities, and health workers play in supporting them. Despite the natural act of breastfeeding, mothers often face societal stigma, particularly when nursing in public.

This stigma affects not only men but also women who may stare or pass judgment when mothers nurse in public, discouraging them from feeding their babies when needed. This cultural barrier needs to be dismantled to empower mothers to breastfeed confidently and freely, without the necessity of designated feeding rooms. Breastfeeding is a source of pride and a vital aspect of maternal and child health. Ensuring mothers can breastfeed without shame or hindrance in any setting is essential for promoting the well-being of infants and supporting maternal health.

Jayanthi Subramaniam | Chennai

about the necessity of carrying out Caste Census. The member from the treasury bench instead of spelling out the opinion of the government and the convincing statistics or supportive logic. The ex-minister's expressions, unfortunately, lace decency and take the etiquette of the Parliament to its lowest ebb. The leader of his party should have corrected him if not admonished. There can be no civilized person who can encourage, appreciate or support such uncomplimentary expressions.

Such expressions display the lack of convincing reasons to oppose the demand of the opposition party. It is known to all that every party has its caste base and in every stage of its functioning caste plays its predominant role. If the reservation system should be a meaningful one a the latest numerical, economic and social status of all the castes. All political parties should train those peoples' representatives in their parties on the dos and donts in the house.

AG Rajmohan | Anantapur

#### PRIORITISE ROAD SAFETY

Madam — Because it saves lives, road safety is vital. In 2022, there were 4.23 lakh injuries and 1.71 lakh fatalities from traffic accidents in India. Road accidents can be avoided by taking real safety precautions, such as proper road design, speed restriction, and sufficient visibility. How can we increase road safety is becoming a subject for concern. Enforcing current standards—for example, local authorities needing qualified personnel and appropriate equipment—is one method to improve road security. Transport operators who don't adhere to safety regulations should face harsh fines. Proper data collection is another strategy to increase road safety. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways should better gather and disseminate information on vehicle registrations, safety certificates, and accident reports.

Neha Tomar | Ujjain

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



## FIRST COLUMN FINDING TRUE SHELTER

The divine presence of God offers the ultimate refuge and gives true solace



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

I would like to draw attention to where our thoughts normally go to, what we consider is our shelter and what it should ideally be. Where do our minds routinely take us to? The body has to be the first, because of the mind-body connection. We all know that our minds affect our bodies, and our bodies do likewise. For example, there is a fever. The mind will naturally go to it and think about dealing with it. Similarly, if one is feeling depressed, bodily changes will take place like becoming fearful. (The Bhagavad-Geeta 2.1) The next target is sense enjoyment; our senses are forever seeking their sense of objects. Mind is their leader. (15.7) Our so-called intelligence is no friend; it will justify whatever the uncontrolled mind cooks up.

Emotions are not far behind. All of us have some pronounced weakness, be it lust, greed, anger, hate, etc. If not controlled our actions will be controlled by them. And there will be consequences. The ego cannot be left behind for long. I am superior and I will prove it, though no one is big or ever can be; only God is big. The rest of us can excel in something but remain small eternally. One can become very rich, powerful, famous, etc. but will be helpless in other matters. The connected topic is what we consider our shelter to be. Is a home our shelter? In physical terms it is. A famous golfer was asked by a reporter after a famous win achieved after a great deal of physical exertion, "What will you like to do now the most?" He replied, "I will like to sleep long in my own bed in my home." Some world leaders carry their own beds with them when they travel. Their shelter is their beds. But are beds, homes, etc. our real shelters? The wife of a world leader replied, "I get very depressed sometimes." Shelter is mainly a mental issue.

Shelter of a home does not prevent mental illness. Many genuine 'san-nyasis' (saintly persons) don't have a fixed home; they keep on travelling. Yes, this is not for the majority, but the idea is proper shelter. God is the real shelter. A small soul needs a very strong shelter, a very big shelter, which only God can be. Loneliness is becoming a major issue worldwide, especially in Western countries. In the USA, twenty-nine per-



cent of households have single occupancy. Upwards of 40% of marriages end in divorce. And 25% plus people have some kind of mental problem. Why is it so? Because the real shelter is being ignored.

We are seeking shelter in material objects like money, power, fame, etc. When we take shelter from God, He teaches us the quality of love. We begin to accept people as they are because all of us have faults; only God is perfect. Seeking perfection in a human being is a lost cause. And we can easily get God's company, as I have done. Just hang a large photo of God near your bed, and look at Him. Then, many changes will begin to happen. God is attractive beyond imagination. Unfortunately, we don't exercise this option. Did you know that God's name Krishna means one who attracts? Soon there will be attachment, because 'atmabala' (inner strength) will flow into you. This strength is the mother of all strengths, i.e. intellectual, mental, physical and even to tolerate.

As this is a spiritual practice, one will make spiritual progress. Slowly, we will begin to consider God as our own, which He is; God is waiting for us. If this practice is so great, what 'naman' (namaskar) can do? Lord Krishna has asked us to do just that in verse #18.65, "Offer obeisance to Me." Our worst enemy in taking shelter from God - the ego will get gradually controlled. We will develop the quality of humility, which will also help in our dealings with others. God will bless us as we remain in His company. We can also pray to Him anytime because in a way God considers it appropriate. Grant of our specific prayers is a tough ask but over a period of time, we will get there. So where should we direct our attention? Whose shelter should we seek?

(The writer is a spiritual teacher; views are personal)

# Venezuela elections: Plagued by disorder and discontent



NILANTHA ILANGAMUWA

Following Nicolás Maduro's victory over right-wing candidate Edmundo González, there is confusion and chaos in the country fanned by Western media

In Venezuela, last Sunday was more than just a day of elections; it was the 70th birth anniversary of Hugo Chávez, the transformative leader who revolutionised Venezuela's social fabric. Chávez, who died prematurely from pelvic cancer at the age of 58, left an enduring legacy that continues to shape the nation's history. Unsurprisingly, the Western media is once again engaging in its usual tactic of misleading the public regarding Venezuelan elections to serve its interests. When a leader elected through a free and fair process but who rejects the Western model is demonised as undemocratic, while a leader who aligns with Western ideals is hailed as democratic despite questionable means of coming to power, it reveals a clear bias.

This pattern was evident in the aftermath of Venezuela's recent elections, where protests, statue removals, and airport blockades dominated the news because the outcome did not align with Western expectations. Following Nicolás Maduro's victory over the right-wing candidate Edmundo González, the opposition—who had promised to accept the results only if they won—immediately denounced the election as fraudulent without presenting credible evidence. Their claims centre around alleged discrepancies between paper ballots and electronic results, which they use to suggest tampering. Venezuela's voting system aims to prevent fraud with electronic voting, ID and fingerprint verification, and paper receipts for cross-checking. Election observers from 95 countries reported a calm process, while opposition claims of having three-quarters of the paper ballots remain unsubstantiated.

Media reports, including an Edison Research exit poll showing González leading by over 30%, are questioned due to their ties to U.S. state media and the fact that exit polling is illegal in Venezuela. The opposition and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken quickly declared the election illegitimate, reflecting a pattern of U.S. interference, such as the 2019 recognition of Juan Guaidó over Maduro and past support for coups against Venezuelan leaders. The U.S. has consistently sought to control Venezuela's vast oil reserves, the largest in the world. Chávez's 1990 election disrupted the elite and foreign corporations' exploitation of these resources, redirecting oil revenue to the Venezuelan people. U.S.-backed coups in 2002 and 2019 aimed to reclaim control over Venezuela's oil. John Bolton, Trump's national security advisor, openly expressed desires for U.S. companies to dominate Venezuela's energy sector, revealing economic motives behind political actions. Chávez's anti-imperialist stance and Maduro's continuation of these policies challenged U.S. dominance in Latin America.

Venezuela's support for global South nations and opposition to U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq inspired regional progressive movements. The U.S., under the guise of humanitarian concern, enforces sanctions causing severe poverty and scarcity in Venezuela, driving migration and economic collapse. These sanctions have decimated Venezuela's oil sector and government income, exacerbating the very crises the U.S. claims to address.

The U.S. strategy of manufactured poverty and social crises is a well-worn tactic to justify regime change. The United States' obsession with overthrowing Venezuela's



government stems from multiple factors, with oil being a significant one. Venezuela holds the largest oil reserves in the world, and many U.S. companies have long desired access to these resources. Despite the U.S. being a major oil producer, the nationalisation of Venezuelan oil under Hugo Chávez and the subsequent exclusion of U.S. oil corporations have driven American interests in destabilising the Venezuelan government. This nationalisation was seen as a direct challenge to U.S. economic interests and a disruption of the global oil market that the U.S. seeks to dominate. Beyond oil, Venezuela's push for a multipolar world presents a direct challenge to U.S. hegemony.

Since the Bolivarian revolution led by Hugo Chávez, Venezuela has sought to forge alliances with countries such as China, Russia, and Iran. Additionally, Venezuela has been instrumental in the creation of regional organisations like CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America). These efforts are aimed at reducing dependency on the U.S. economy. This ideological shift threatens the traditional power structures maintained by U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere. In response to these obstacles, the U.S. has imposed severe sanctions and blockades on Venezuela, much like its long-standing policies against Cuba.

These measures are designed to suffocate Venezuela's economy, incite political unrest, and ultimately force a change in government. The deepening of Venezuela's relationships with major powers such as China and Russia further threatens U.S. geopolitical interests. These partnerships offer Venezuela economic and military support, making it increasingly resilient against U.S. attempts at destabilisation. The U.S. perceives these multipolar alliances as a direct affront to its global dominance and has consequently intensified its efforts to undermine the Venezuelan government. It is in this context that the U.S. government is backing yet another coup attempt in

Venezuela, after their "disappointed elections" result.

Over the past two decades, Washington has sponsored several coup attempts, often violent, to overthrow Venezuela's government, including targeting former revolutionary president Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro. In 2002, the U.S. backed a military coup that briefly overthrew Chávez, Venezuela's democratically elected president. Despite mainstream acknowledgement from sources like The Guardian that the Bush administration supported this coup, it lasted only two days as the Venezuelan people reinstated Chávez, who continued his Bolivarian revolution.

Following the presidential elections on 28 July, where Maduro was re-elected, the U.S. and its Latin American allies refused to recognise the results. Instead, violent extremists, supported by powerful figures like billionaire Elon Musk, have been burning down public institutions, government buildings, and hospitals, and destroying buses while looting offices to overthrow Maduro.

This aligns with Musk's history of supporting U.S.-backed coups in Latin America, as seen in his 2019 backing of the Bolivian coup to access lithium reserves for electric vehicles. Independent analysts have reported that the unproven claims of electoral fraud in Venezuela originate from Edison Research, a New Jersey-based firm with reported close ties to the U.S. government and the CIA. This firm works with U.S. government propaganda outlets like Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, which were established by the CIA. Despite these baseless allegations, independent international electoral observers, including the National Lawyers Guild and human rights activists, have confirmed the transparency and fairness of Venezuela's electoral process. They condemned the U.S.-backed opposition's refusal to accept the results, which undermines Venezuela's democracy. Donald Trump, during his presidency, admitted the U.S. aimed to take

over Venezuela and its oil. His administration recognised right-wing opposition figure Juan Guaidó as the supposed president of Venezuela, despite his lack of electoral participation. The Trump administration's coup attempt in 2019 failed, as Guaidó never gained power. The Biden administration continues to back far-right extremists like María Corina Machado, who allegedly collaborates with oligarchs and calls for military intervention to overthrow Maduro. Historically, U.S.-backed coup attempts in Venezuela have been violent. After Chávez died in 2013 and Maduro's election, far-right extremists launched another coup attempt in 2014, burning government buildings and attacking supporters of the government. Leaders of these coup attempts, like Leopoldo López and María Corina Machado, have close ties to the U.S. government.

Despite engaging in violent coup attempts, these opponents walk free in Venezuela, which starkly contrasts with the U.S.'s portrayal of the country as a dictatorship. U.S. sanctions have severely worsened Venezuela's economic crisis. Ironically, these sanctions have led to a U.S. energy crisis, as sanctions on Iran and Russia have made affordable energy scarce for Europe. Despite the high cost and insufficiency of U.S. liquefied natural gas, Venezuelan oil remains blocked from European markets due to the sanctions. In June 2022, the U.S. pivoted its strategy by permitting the transport of Venezuelan oil to Europe to compensate for the void left by reduced Russian supplies. This strategic recalibration paved the way for the Barbados Agreement in October 2023, which initiated a gradual easing of sanctions. The elections held on 28 July were a direct result of this process. However, the U.S. encountered significant challenges in realising its typical political objectives through overt manipulation, while it continued to exert its influence through covert channels.

(The writer is a journalist and author. Views are personal)



OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, WASHINGTON HAS SPONSORED SEVERAL COUP ATTEMPTS, OFTEN VIOLENT, TO OVERTHROW VENEZUELA'S GOVERNMENT, INCLUDING TARGETING FORMER REVOLUTIONARY PRESIDENT HUGO CHÁVEZ AND HIS SUCCESSOR, NICOLÁS MADURO

# Operation Safedsagar: The Indian Air Force's triumph in the Kargil war

This operation highlighted the bravery, ingenuity, and strategic importance of the IAF, cementing its legacy in modern warfare

The Kargil War of 1999 marked a significant milestone for the Indian Air Force (IAF), which participated in large-scale combat for the first time since the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. In April 1999, around 1500 Pakistani soldiers infiltrated Indian territory in Kargil, Jammu, and Kashmir to sever the connection between Kashmir and Ladakh.

The air operations in the Kargil region by IAF were named 'Operation Safedsagar'. In the 1990s, covert intruders from Pakistan stationed at high-altitude peaks made it difficult for the Indian army and IAF to carry out military operations in the challenging mountainous terrain of J&K since it was impossible to pinpoint their exact locations.



DEEPAK KUMAR PANDEY

Operation Safedsagar marked a revolutionary use of aerial capabilities in a distinct and demanding setting. The IAF's successful use of air power in the Kargil conflict is a source of pride for India. The strategic deployment of air power became essential in the War, as it effectively provided direct air support to ground troops and executed highly precise bombings on enemy targets, thereby exerting a substantial

impact on the final result of the battle. The IAF encountered notable challenges due to its operational areas' geographical and environmental factors.

The Kargil region is known for its very intricate topography. Engaging in operations at high altitudes invariably presents formidable obstacles, such as the notable deterioration of both aircraft and weapon efficiency.

The delivery of a weapon to the target is significantly influenced by weather at higher altitudes. The winds are usually powerful and higher than the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) required 'minima'. Given this, manoeuvring is necessary to complete the essential launch. Despite challenging geographical and meteorological condi-



tions, the operation exemplified exceptional bravery, persistence, and commitment. By July 23, 1999, the Indian forces successfully recaptured the Kargil Heights, a testament to their unwavering commitment and bravery that is sure to inspire.

**Innovations for Technical**

**Asymmetry Dividends**  
The IAF demonstrated exceptional ingenuity and resourcefulness during the Kargil conflict by successfully deploying several unique innovations. The IAF aimed to develop and use several weapon launch strategies. The Indian Air Force effectively used laser-

guided bombs deployed from Mirage-2000 aircraft to significantly impair the adversary's logistical routes, a testament to their innovative tactics.

The laser-guided missile pods were modified to carry 1000-kilogram bombs from the World War II era, particularly for storage aboard the Ajeet aircraft.

The Mirage-2000 aircraft used these bombs for the first time after making immediate modifications. The IAF reportedly chose weapon-impact zones that may trigger a domino effect leading to avalanches or landslides. To establish firing limits for rockets and weaponry at high heights, a meticulous process is needed to determine specific mountain peaks that closely resemble the height of enemy fortifications.

Performing real-time shooting trials in such conditions enables the acquisition of crucial data to enhance and improve the efficiency of these weapons.

Using laser designators installed on MiG-29 aircraft to guide the ammunition released by Mirage-2000 combat fighters was an incredible achievement. By using this innovative methodology, the precision and efficiency of the impacts were significantly improved. The Mirage-2000 aircraft were outfitted with Litening pods that enhanced target detection and facilitated the precise launching of guided missiles. This was the first-ever deployment of cutting-edge targeting technology by the IAF in combat operations. During air operations in the

Kargil War, the capabilities of precision strikes helped the IAF reduce the amount of collateral damage and neutralise hostile positions. The efficient use of air power has averted more casualties considerably reduced the duration of the Indian Army has achieved substantial progress on the battlefield. An in-depth understanding of the Kargil operations is crucial for appreciating India's changing alignment in aerospace power. This battle serves as an exceptional case study for analysing the use of airpower in joint engagements in extremely mountainous regions.

(The writer is Retd Group Captain, IAF, and Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies; views are personal)

# Landmark verdict on deepening affirmative action

COMING to the aid of more disadvantaged sections within SCs and STs in availing of government quota, a seven-judge Constitutional Bench led by the Chief Justice by a 6-1 majority delivered afar-reaching verdict August 1 in favour of the states sub-classifying the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to impart inclusivity and ensure equitable distribution of welfare, be it education or jobs. Seizing the moment, Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy announced Telangana will be the first state in the country to implement the SC verdict.

Amidst increasing unemployment and growing uncertainty in private sector jobs, there is feverish race for government employment for the security and steady growth it offers. Besides, among

the reserved categories themselves, better-offs have been leaving worse-offs so far behind that a demand for sub-categorisation has been growing strong for over four decades. Punjab had in 1975 itself recognised the need for sub-quotas and introduced 50 per cent quota within the SC quota for Mazhabi Sikhs and Valmikis. However, the Punjab-Haryana HC in 2010 ruled against the order, basing its judgement on that of a five-judge bench of the SC in 2004.

The only dissenting judge, Justice Bela M Trivedi, opined the states have no legislative competence to enact the law for providing reservation or giving preferential treatment to a particular caste/castes by dividing/sub-dividing/sub-classifying or regrouping the castes, races or tribes enumerated

as the 'Scheduled Castes' in the notification under Article 341. Earlier, a five-judge bench of the top court in the EV Chinniah v State of Andhra Pradesh case in 2004 had said creation of sub-quota did not stand constitutional scrutiny. It ruled that all castes in the Presidential Order under Article 341(1) formed one homogeneous group and could not be subdivided further. Further, Article 341 of the Constitution empowers only the President to identify SCs through public notification.

Justice Trivedi upheld the 2004 ruling. However, the majority judges backed sub-classification, thus reversing the said ruling. Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud observed their verdict does not violate either Article 14 or 341 of the Constitution. The judgement

stressed that sub-categorisation, carried out on the basis of authentic data and scientific study, would make the SC/ST quota more inclusive.

TDP is naturally elated as it was the N Chandrababu Naidu government that enacted a bill on SC categorisation into A, B, C, D groups with reservation in the ratio of 1, 7, 6, 1 per cents respectively in 2000, a year after its ordinance on the matter was challenged in the court. While the High Court dismissed petitions against it, a five judge bench of SC in 2004 ruled that States had no right to sub-classify the SCs.

The latest verdict, however, doesn't cover Central government as there has been no demand. Moreover, with over 1,000 SC and 700 ST communities out there,

many of them being state-specific, it is next to impossible for the Centre to take up such an exercise. Same would apply to higher educational institutions, varsities under central government rules.

At the end, it is to be noted that four of the seven top court judges felt there is a need for exclusion of creamy layer from SC/ST reservation benefits i.e., affirmative action policies, as in the case of OBCs, so that underprivileged sections get more opportunities for government benefits. On the whole, the crux of the judgement is more judicious application of affirmative action, well explained by Justice B R Gavai thus: "It is the duty of the State to give preferential treatment to the backward class of citizens who are not adequately represented."

## LETTERS

### Gadkari's pitch for GST waiver welcome

THIS refers to Hans timely editorial "Stop levying tax on uncertainties of life" (August 2). Union Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari urged Finance Minister to consider withdrawing 18 per cent GST on life and medical insurance premiums. It is a needed appeal. Most experts are wholeheartedly welcoming his frank opinion without any fear of his boss. Is Gadkari not aware of the fact that budget is prepared in consultation with PM? This request could have been made to the PM before the budget was presented. Sometime ago in my unpublished letter to Hans, I advised that PM's post should be offered to Gadkari who listens, acts and answers to public patiently.

Dr NSR Murthy, Secunderabad

### Timely justice to disadvantaged people

THE apex court has delivered a landmark judgement in case of reservations. The seven judge bench has clarified that the state governments can classify the list of scheduled castes and scheduled Tribes in to different groups to accord preferential treatment in applying quota. Till now some tribes are being considered as primitive tribal groups and are being given special financial assistance and attention by the Government, but such arrangement is not in case of education and employment. Now the judgement has made it possible to extend such preference in the reservations for education and jobs. Anyway the states have the onus to act with care. The identification of groups should be based on unchallengeable evidence and reason. The categorisation should not be made or perceived to be made on political reasons.

Dr DVG Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

THE landmark ruling by the Supreme Court by a seven-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, by a majority 6:1, set aside the apex court verdict of 2014 that no sub-classification of Scheduled Castes (SCs) can be allowed as they are a homogenous class in themselves that the states have no legislative competence for providing reservation for other sub castes of the community, under Article 341. The new ruling by the SC will ensure more talented and intelligent students from other sub groups of the SCs to take this profound advantage - while Article 341(2) says Parliament can include any caste, race, or tribe from the list of SCs - that will provide substantive equality of opportunity for all backward classes in climbing the ladder of education and landing in jobs.

K V Raghuram, Wayanad

PROPOS, "States can sub-classify SCs, rules apex court". The SC verdict that states are constitutionally empowered to make sub-classification of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for granting quotas within the reserved category in order to uplift more underprivileged castes is historical. The ruling comes with a rider that the sub-classification has to be justified by "quantifiable and demonstrable data by the states, which cannot act on their whims." The challenge for the states is to ensure that the benefits of reservation percolate down to the neediest and poorest of the poor. The creamy layer has made the most of reservation from one generation to another, even as the weakest sections have lagged socially as well as economically. Addressing the inadequacy of representation of certain sub-categories can pave the way for their much-needed uplift. One hopes that governments make earnest efforts to remove intra-quota imbalances and disparities.

N Sadasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

### Protect Ghats as eco sensitive area

THE entire Western Ghats stretching from Gujarat to Kerala extends over a distance of 1,500 km and is the second most landslide-prone region after the Himalayas. The Western Ghats are an eco sensitive area and due to Climate Change are witnessing heavy rainfall and subsequent land and mud slides. The govts of the respective States have paid very little heed to Centre's warning to restrict developmental activities like construction, new thermal power projects and coming up of small industries. Deforestation and mining have led to loosening of the Soil and this has led to landslides during extremely heavy rainfall. Another reason is the growing promotion of monsoon tourism. The Ghats need to be protected from unchecked and hazardous human activities and our ecosystem preserved.

Parimala G Tadas, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

**BENGALURU ONLINE**

### Property tax OTS extended by a month: Dy CM

BENGALURU: DCM DK Shivakumar announced: "In view of the expiry of the 'One Time Relief Scheme' (OTS) implemented for property tax defaulters (July 31), due to public pressure, it has been extended by one month till August 31."

Speaking to the media after the 13th Nano Technology International Conference on Friday, DCM Shivakumar said, "So far property tax of Rs 3,000 crore has been collected and an additional tax of Rs 400 crore is awaited. There is pressure from the authorities and the public that some changes should be made and the OTS period should be extended by one month. Due to the server problem and some others have issued checks, the time period given till July 31 has been extended by one month i.e. till August 31," he said. "Some changes will be made so that those who are paying taxes honestly will not suffer. If someone has overpaid, it will be waived off next time the property tax is paid. "There should be no unnecessary panic in this matter," he said.

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

## Calls against Shapiro as Kamala Harris' Vice-President pick

JAKE JOHNSON

ONE critic argued Harris would risk alienating "precisely the people she needs to ensure her victory over Trump" if she picks Pennsylvania's Governor as her running mate.



Reports that presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris is leaning toward selecting Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro as her running mate have sparked warnings from progressives who say his record and policy positions on key issues - from Palestine to public schools to climate - are cause for serious alarm and should be disqualifying.

Earlier this week, dozens of progressive leaders from across the United States wrote in a letter to Harris that Shapiro's "support for school vouchers is in direct conflict with our teachers union allies and the Democratic Party Platform, threatening to undermine labor support" in a general election matchup with Republican nominee Donald Trump.

The letter's signatories recommended Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear as possible alternatives to Shapiro, who last year relented to pressure and vetoed a school voucher program that he previously supported. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported last month that Shapiro "says school vouchers are still a priority for him."

"Democrats need a credible and respected voice that has a track record of winning over and exciting an electorate, especially the ability to turn out young voters, immigrants, and independents in swing states," reads the progressives' letter, signed by the chair of the California Democratic Party's Progressive Caucus, the head of the Nevada Democratic Party, the executive director of Progressive Democrats of America, a member of the Ohio Democratic Party's executive committee, and others.

"Shapiro has... done far more than most Democrats to attack pro-Palestine antiwar demonstrators, in ways that call into question his basic commitment to First Amendment rights," writer David Klion argued in The New Republic last week, noting that the Pennsylvania governor compared protesters rallying against Israel's genocide in Gaza to the Ku Klux Klan.

A coalition of pro-Palestine groups has launched a website dub-

bing Shapiro "Genocide Josh" and warning Harris against picking him as her running mate. Shapiro has also faced criticism for supporting corporate tax cuts.

Harris is expected to announce her vice presidential pick ahead of a scheduled rally Tuesday in Philadelphia, part of a broader campaign swing through pivotal battleground states. According to Politico, a Harris aide "cautioned against reading too much into the first city chosen for the tour," pushing back on speculation that the event's location confirms Shapiro will be Harris' running mate.

A survey released earlier this week showed that Trump is narrowly leading Harris in Pennsylvania, and it's far from clear that picking Shapiro as her running mate would help her win the state.

"Other names in the mix include Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg," Politico reported earlier this week. "Shapiro said on Tuesday that he had not spoken to Harris since July 21, the day that Biden dropped out."

Will Bunch argued in a column for The Philadelphia Inquirer "that it's no wonder that progressives seem to be lining up in the VP contest behind Minnesota's Walz, who like Shapiro has some policy wins on cherished liberal issues like expanding free school lunches but isn't lugging around political baggage like the Pennsylvania governor." "Whether Harris, said to have close ties to Shapiro, sees it the same way will tell us a lot about her White House bid," Bunch added.

(<https://www.common-dreams.org/>)

## MOVEMENT FOR SC SUB-CLASSIFICATION

# A long & arduous struggle pays off



August 1, 2024 will go down in the history as the day of landmark judgement as the Supreme Court gave its verdict that States can sub-classify SCs. This would help to ensure even distribution of benefits of reservation to the more backward sections which form part of the Constitution's basic structure.

Justice Arun Mishra rightly pointed out that, "the state cannot be deprived of the power to take care of the qualitative and quantitative difference between different classes... to take ameliorative measures. When reservation creates inequalities within the reserved castes itself, it is required to be taken care of by the State by making sub-classification so that State largesse does not concentrate in few hands and equal justice is provided to all."

Article 16(4) of the Constitution says, "Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making any provision for the reservation of appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the state, is not adequately represented in the services under the State".

The issue of sub-categorisation is not a new one. It has been there almost since the Mandal Commission report was adopted by the Parliament. Based on the Mandal Commission, the OBCs get 27% reservation in jobs and educational institutions. However, there were concerns that there is unequal distribution of benefits among various OBC communities.

As far as Telugu states are concerned, it has witnessed a three-decade-long fight for sub-categorisation. The stir actually began from Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh under the banner of Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi (MRPS). Manda Krishna took up the fight for sub-categorisation in early 1980 as village-level anti-caste activist in Warangal. He had a valid reason for this. Madigas are the largest among the 59 SC sub-castes in Telangana followed by the Malas.

According to unofficial estimates of the previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government, SCs make up around 19% of the state's population. According to the 2011 Census, the MRPS claims SC population in the state to be 54.32 lakh, of which Madigas make up 32.22 lakh while 15.27 lakh are Malas. The Madiga community is socially and economically highly backward as compared to the Mala community. The Madigas in Telangana are more backward in terms of education and employment while Malas have reached greater heights both in jobs and politics. In fact, the use of word 'Madiga' was used in a derogatory manner for long.

The fight for sub-categorisation took a new turn following the massacre of Dalits at Karamechud in undivided Andhra Pradesh in 1985 and Tsundur in 1991. Manda Krishna got associated with the larger Dalit movements and started con-



The over four decades long struggle of the most marginalised sections among the SCs, which at times seemed dormant, for the sub-categorisation of the SC list to benefit laggard sections has at last yielded desired result, owing to perseverance of leaders like Manda Krishna Madiga. While in the beginning Chandrababu Naidu took up the issue and went for an ordinance, Narendrababu Modi extended support during 2024 campaign. Courts went back and forth on the issue over constitutional legality of their just demand. Finally, a Constitutional Bench of the Apex Court has realised the despondency of the aggrieved sections as benefits largely went to a few better-off sections, and delivered a landmark judgement, allowing states to go ahead with the SC categorisation

solidating the SC communities. The Madigas always felt that the Dalit movements were being dominated by Malas who were not extending support for justice to the Madiga and other marginal communities among the SCs. Hence, he formed MRPS in July 1994 in Prakasam district, along with Krupakar Madiga, Dandu Veeriah Madiga, Kommuri Kanaka Rao Madiga, Mary Madiga and others. They added the word Madiga as suffix to their names and started a massive campaign for sub-categorisation as A,B,C and D categories. The movement spread like a wild fire across the erstwhile AP.

The MRPS organised a public meeting near the statue of Babu Jagjivan Ram at Nizam College on September 2, 1996. This meeting proved to be a historic one as over one lakh Madigas from various districts of AP took part and did not budge despite continuous rain. They were demanding that the then CM N Chandrababu Naidu attend the meeting and announce classification of SCs. Naidu around 6 pm on that day sent a delegation comprising TDP leaders Manda Jagannadham, S Rajiah and Sudarshan to Krishna Madiga and they assured that the government was committed to do justice to them.

But the rallyists were not satisfied and finally around 10 pm Naidu himself went there and announced that he would form a commission to study the issue and submit a report within 45 days.

Accordingly, Naidu formed the commission with Justice P Ramachandra Raju for enquiry into the differential benefits of reservation by Mala and Madiga sub-castes and to recommend the need for categorisation of SCs into groups for equal distribution of reservation benefits. Based on the commission's recommendation, the TDP government announced sub-categorisation and issued a GO classifying the reservations among the SCs in education and employment sectors.

But unhappy over this, the Mala Mahanadu filed a writ petition in the High Court challenging the GO and the court struck it down on technical grounds. The TDP government then moved the national SC/ST Commission in Delhi, submit-

ted all the data and in October 1998 the cabinet approved the proposal to issue an ordinance on categorisation and it was sent to the then Governor C Rangarajan who sent it to the President of India K R Narayanan for his opinion. Finally, the President also approved it and the ordinance was issued in December 1999. But the Mala Mahanadu knocked on the doors of apex court which struck it down on technical grounds saying states have no right to carry out categorisation.

This became a major political issue, and national and regional parties wanted a constitutional amendment. This led to several agitations by MRPS. In the 2004 elections, TDP lost to Congress party which won 185 of the 294 seats. During the Congress regime, Manda Krishna took up a walkathon for 55 days covering 1,600 km. The walkathon concluded with a mammoth meeting in which people from AP, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu participated. The MRPS charged the Congress government led by Y S Rajasekhara Reddy with failing to persuade the Centre to introduce a bill in Parliament. The MRPS was also unhappy that the state government failed to lead a delegation to Delhi. They finally relented when the Congress government announced its willingness to take an all-party delegation to Delhi.

The intensity of the agitation was such that the AICC which wanted to hold its plenary in Hyderabad in 2006 which was to be attended by AICC president Sonia Gandhi and the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had tough time convincing the MRPS to call off the 'Kurukshetra Mahasabha', demanding that Congress bring in constitutional amendment scheduled to coincide with the plenary. Repeated pleas by YSR failed and, finally, YSR, Digvijay Singh and K Kesav Rao assured that they would extend support to the cause and the Mahasabha was called off. The struggle continued and an exasperated Krishna announced fast-unto-death in December 2008 demanding that the government introduce a bill on SC classification in Parliament. It ended with the arrest of Krishna after 8 days of tension. The struggle did not end and, finally, before

the Telangana Lok Sabha elections 2024, Krishna got the support of the Prime Minister Narendrababu Modi for his cause. Modi assured him that the government would try for categorisation of the SCs once the court gives its verdict which came on August 1.

The issue of categorisation is not unique for the Telangana. It may be recalled that the Punjab government in 1975 issued a notification dividing its existing 25% reservation for the SCs into two categories. 50% of the seats reserved for the SCs were to be offered to Balmikis (Valmikis) and Mazhabi Sikhs, while the other half was for the remaining groups within the category.

This remained in effect till 31 years until the Supreme Court's five-judge bench in the EV Chinniah vs Andhra Pradesh case set aside a similar law in Andhra Pradesh. The apex court then felt that the act was violative of right to equality. The court held that the SC list must be treated as a single, homogenous group. It also said that according to Article 341 of the Constitution, the power to create a list of SC communities for the purpose of reservation rests with the President. So, the states don't have the power of sub-classification.

In 2017, the BJP-led NDA government proposed sub-categorisation of SCs and constituted a commission led by Justice G Rohini. The commission submitted its report in 2023. It said 97% of the reserved jobs and seats had gone to 25% of OBC sub-castes, and only 10 OBC communities have taken the 25% of reserved central jobs and institutional seats. It further said that 37% of the 2,600 communities under OBC category had zero representation in jobs and only 2.68% reservation has been used by 994 castes. The final report was submitted on July 21, 2023 to President of India Droupadi Murmu and a year later, the apex court gave its decision permitting the states to go in for sub-categorisation of the SCs. One hopes that this judgement would be used by the political parties to ensure that the justice is done to the SCs in a genuine manner and they get benefits in education and jobs rather than use it for narrow political gains.

# Opinion

SATURDAY, AUGUST 3, 2024

## DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND

President Droupadi Murmu

“Youth development and youth-led development will gain more momentum if the energy of the youth could be channelised into positive and constructive work”



## Protectionist India Inc?

Commerce minister's strong words point to important stakeholder resistance to FTAs

**UNION COMMERCE AND** industry minister Piyush Goyal used unusually strong language against India Inc for what he called ignoring the national interest for small gains. In the context of free trade agreements (FTAs), he said earlier this week that while industry wants access to international markets it seeks protection in the form of duty concessions. There is no doubt that India Inc has been far from enthusiastic about the FTAs the government has inked or plans to pursue. Its ambivalence stems from the limited benefits of such deals due to the persisting domestic handicap of inverted duty structures: Tariffs on raw materials are often higher than on finished goods that encourage more imports of the latter. The worry is also over the lack of a level playing field amidst concerns that major trading partners like China can inundate the domestic market through third countries with cheaper steel, chemicals, and electrical goods thanks to surplus capacities and subsidies. Opposition from the automobile and electronics industry prevented an early harvest trade agreement with Thailand from graduating into a full-fledged FTA.

Obviously, India Inc is unlikely to directly counter Goyal's comments. The late economist IG Patel presciently wrote about this tendency of many in private business “who think even now that rather than incur the displeasure and unpleasantness of opposing government policies and all that, it is much simpler, much cheaper, much more comfortable to be on its right side”. Despite their misgivings about FTAs not yielding the desired results and absence of adequate consultations, apex industry chambers like the Confederation of Indian Industry and Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry have signalled a willingness to embrace broader, new-age FTAs that entail regulatory policy reform, intellectual property rights protection (IPRs), and labour rights, etc. The former has said that it is keen to see the early conclusion of FTAs with the UK and the European Union (EU) and is working with the government to ensure that while negotiating issues like sustainability and IPRs, “the genuine interests of Indian industry are preserved”. These interests of course include the need for FTAs to be fair and balanced and safeguards are in place, wherever required, to have a level playing field.

While Goyal frets over how the FTAs with the UK and the EU can be inked, the barriers to concluding deep and ambitious FTAs are also from the government's side. Not so long ago, the commerce ministry mulled a proposal to set up an inter-ministerial panel to ensure better coordination as differences on crucial and sensitive issues within ministries that oversee different sectors also tend to delay FTA negotiations. Stakeholders with conflicting interests across sectors make the job difficult for negotiators. For instance, the domestic dairy industry's apprehensions of stiff competition in milk and milk products from Australia and New Zealand were responsible in large part for India walking out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership although some other sectors were less hesitant to join the grouping.

Such new-generation deals clearly call for greater coordination within government, cutting across various ministries and departments, as they entail much more than preferential tariff-line liberalisation. India does not have enough experience dealing with these issues. There is also a need to induct domain experts into the commerce ministry to assist with the FTA negotiations. India Inc's protectionism is not the only barrier in concluding ambitious and comprehensive FTAs to boost India's export drive.

## The predicted Olympic doom never came to Paris

**FOR THE BETTER** part of a year, a lot of Parisians have been planning for the Olympics — not to attend them, but to escape them. Fear of an unlivable city packed with tourists and deprived of basic goods has been matched with greed at the prospect of charging those same tourists insane sums for accommodation on AirBnB. Overtourism, price-gouging, and harsh policing would surely make Paris hell.

Luckily for those of us still here, nothing has turned out as expected, rather like the bedbugs meme that went viral but bore little relation to reality.

Paris has rarely seemed less hellish: Security barriers blocking the Seine have been largely dismantled, the rain has stopped, and Paris' landmarks look incredible from the Grand Palais' fencing events to the Pont Alexandre III's triathlon finish. Friendly cops from different countries are walking the streets, smiling volunteers are everywhere, and the metro has plenty of room to spare. Gold medals galore are spreading joy in a land of pessimists.

This isn't just the power of sport, or the benefits of good organisation. Despite expectations of 15 million extra visitors for the Olympics, the combination of fleeing Parisians, hesitant tourists, and dramatic unforeseen events like infrastructure sabotage seem to have made one of the world's most densely populated cities less packed and more livable.

Vehicle traffic has fallen 22% in one week, and the average speed on the peripherique ring road is up 31%, according to data firm Coyote. This isn't your average summer wind-down, nor is it urban desolation on the scale of Covid-19. The geography of the Games is diverting tourists from traditional shopping avenues, which may be frustrating for the best-known haunts but good for lesser-travelled neighbourhoods that are hosting events in the name of urban renewal.

For the uber-speculators, it's been a deservedly rude awakening. Out of the whopping 87,000 accommodation options available online in the Paris region for the Olympics, only about one in 10 will be booked during the entirety of the event, according to AirDNA data cited by newspaper *Le Parisien*. Greed is a factor: It's worth remembering that earlier this year some high-end, 100-square-metre homes were being put on the market for around €20,000 (\$21,576) to €30,000 per week. Hotels have also cut prices to half their peak rate, having hiked prices some 300% in anticipation. Some trends, like deflation or tourism fatigue, are too strong even for the greatest show on Earth.

And for the arch-pessimists, this is far from “Le Flop”. Enthusiasm can be heard at the events themselves or seen at new landmarks like the silver balloon holding the Olympic flame in the Tuileries gardens. Even the now-infamous opening ceremony appears to have won over the French, despite plenty of online gnashing of teeth — one poll suggests some 85% of people judged it a “success”. Obviously, tastes are subjective, especially where naked Greco-Roman gods are concerned. But Paris has historical form when it comes to complaining: The Eiffel Tower, built for the 1889 Expo, also generated a lot of outrage at the time among the great and the good who considered it an eyesore. Would anyone say that today?

Sceptics will say none of these good vibes is worth the cost or carbon impact of hosting the Games. Maybe so, especially where the costly clean-up of the Seine is concerned. But Paris surely deserves credit for using pre-existing or temporary constructions for 95% of its Olympic venues and tapping companies like Bernard Arnault's LVMH for 96% of the budget. Good vibes (and tax receipts) can also help the economy: *Bloomberg Economics* reckons French economic growth will pick up in the third quarter.

Given the political battles that await Emmanuel Macron and the French once the athletes go home and Parisians return, with no government in place after recent elections, hell in my view isn't the Olympic Games — it's other people.

**OFFICIAL STATEMENTS** OFTEN conceal more than they reveal, so the apparent unity of the foreign ministers of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue on July 29 in Tokyo masked some disagreements between India and its Quad partners — America, Japan, and Australia — on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but highlighted agreement on a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific.

India has strong trade and investment with its Quad partners: it even has a free trade agreement with Australia. But undercurrents of friction between them are coming out into the open, especially over India's neutrality on Russia's war in Ukraine.

This became obvious when Eric Garcetti, America's ambassador in New Delhi, said on July 10, just two days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trip to Russia that there was no strategic autonomy in conflict. The differences existed even before that. More than two years ago, External affairs minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said, with reference to Russia's illegal assault on Ukraine on June 3, 2022, that Europe should grow out of the mindset that its problems were the world's problems.

Only a week later, Japan and India were poles apart when Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said Ukraine today could be Asia tomorrow. Generally, Asia-Pacific countries are afraid that China will see how the West handles the Ukraine crisis to assess its chances of taking over Taiwan and indulging in expansionist activities in their region.

Japan joined the West in imposing sanctions on Russia and will also sell Patriot missiles to Ukraine. The Quad foreign ministers backed the territorial integrity of Ukraine, unlike Modi and President Vladimir Putin during their

## STRATEGIC DIALOGUES

DESPITE STRONG TRADE LINKS, UNDERCURRENTS OF FRICTION ARE COMING OUT INTO THE OPEN

# India's Quad equation

## ANITA INDER SINGH

Founding professor, Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution



summit in Moscow from July 8-9. Ukraine's territorial integrity was not mentioned in Russian and Indian joint statements, which mentioned the conflict “around Ukraine” rather than in Ukraine. All told, however, India's strong backing for the principle of “territorial integrity” is essential, if only because it applies to its state frontiers with Pakistan and China — and China's boundaries with other Asian neighbours — as much as it applies to Europe. New Delhi does not believe that solutions will emerge on the battlefield. That message should be directed more strongly towards the aggressor, which is Russia.

Differences with Japan, an important Asian friend, and since long, far more economically advanced than China, which threatens the territory of both countries, have also been apparent in other ways. In June, friendly Japan sanctioned an Indian tech company, Si2 Microsystems, based in Bengaluru, for its alleged role in helping Russia evade Western sanctions imposed because of its invasion of Ukraine. (Companies in China, Kazakhstan, the UAE, and Uzbekistan were also sanctioned).

As for China, the Quad foreign min-

isters did not name it in their communiqué, but fear of Chinese imperialism in the South China Sea and against Taiwan has led the US, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea to upgrade their defence ties. On July 28, the US revamped its military command in Japan, giving Japan a “direct leadership role” over American forces in operational planning in both peacetime and in potential crises. The US has also pledged \$500 million in military support to the Philippines amid South China Sea disputes.

On the security front, the Quad foreign ministers also stressed the importance of adherence to international law, particularly as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, to address challenges to the global maritime rules-based order, including in the South and East China Seas. They reiterated their strong opposition to “any unilateral actions that seek to change the status quo by force or coercion”. China remained the elephant in the room.

Beijing's official *Global Times* sarcastically commented that hyping up the “China-threat” rhetoric is “a typical US way of inciting security anxiety”, so as to

make some regional countries rely more on the US-led bloc. The Quad, it pointed out, is a partnership, but not yet an alliance. (It did not say because of India, probably because it was blaming America). Beijing sees the Quad becoming “a major source of creating antagonism and confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region”.

India's Quad partners and several Southeast Asian countries wish to intensify measures to counterbalance Beijing. The South China Sea may be far away from India, but remains crucial for India's strategic interests, including energy security.

And if the US strengthens military bonds with allies, India benefits from the general build-up in Asia against China, without contributing much to security outside its immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood. All the more so as India is not getting closer to resolving its border dispute with China. Nor is it getting closer to dealing with its trade deficit surpassing \$38.11 billion in the initial five months of the current year.

US support for the centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in the Indo-Pacific leads other Quad members to follow suit. India declared that political, economic, and security cooperation with Asean is its top priority. But India has tended to view itself as the centre of the Indo-Pacific because Delhi thinks the word “Indo” implies India. This interpretation has never been accepted by Asean or any Quad partner. Even if India is the only non-ally in the Quad, “Acting East” should lead to strengthening economic and ties with Southeast Asian countries, against China, which is the main threat to their security and India's. And the UN Charter and the territorial integrity of states must always be respected. Those were the main messages of the Quad foreign ministers' meeting.

## A levy on national priorities



### MUKESH BUTANI TARUN JAIN

Respectively, managing partner, BMR Legal, and advocate

The Supreme Court ruling on mineral taxation by states ignores a shift in governance standards towards cooperative federalism

**LAST WEEK**, A nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in a 8:1 majority, reversed a decades-old legal position to uphold the substantive powers of states to levy mineral taxes. The court was of the opinion that the “effort of the constitutional court should be to ensure that state legislatures are not subordinated to the Union in the areas exclusively reserved for them” and the pivotal facet of “fiscal federalism is that both the Union government and the state governments ought to have adequate fiscal resources to discharge their constitutional responsibilities”. This undoubtedly gives a significant fillip to the states' exchequer as such levies are in addition to the royalty charged by mineral-rich states under the respective mining leases. Additionally, states have been empowered to levy land tax on mining leaseholders. Conversely, the minority opinion has canvassed the need to prioritise national growth aspirations, which may be impeded as a result of indiscriminate taxation by a few mineral-rich states. Ostensibly, these opinions conflict inter se. However, both opinions can be reconciled; the majority opinion pictures the constitutional position as it exists, whereas the minority opinion adopts a normative outlook to seek an equilibrium where holistic national growth is not held hostage by narrow regional considerations.

The majority decision is a quintessential constitutional exposition — a legal essay if one may — on Centre-state relations; there can be no Quilmas

about the legal reasoning and the interpretative standards invoked by the apex court. However, as the saying goes, a dissenting opinion is a call (for the future) for course correction. The minority decision does just that, seeking to add a third variable in the governance paradigm — the common citizen. Recognising that the impact of the majority decision will create regional imbalances (given that mineral-rich states are but few) and inhibit the growth aspirations of large sections of the nation's populace who will suffer the burden of these states' revenue collection drives. The minority opinion advocates subjecting the states' mineral taxation rights to constitutional limitations.

The rationale of the majority decision appears to be founded on its premise that “any dilution in the taxing powers of the state legislatures will necessarily impact their ability to raise revenues, which in turn will impede their ability to deliver welfare schemes and services to the people”. There is no doubt that states too need fiscal flexibility. However, this Nelson's eye approach, even if it is recognised as the foundational philosophy of the constitutional landscape, fails to appreciate the seven decades-long shift in governance standards which advocate a transformation in constitutional paradigm — cooperative federalism.

In today's scenario, giving effect to a textual reading of the 50s constitutional provisions dilutes the decades of governance experiences which unequivocally establish that criss-cross fiscal policies pursued by the Centre and states bode well for neither, besides being a bottleneck for national growth and an impediment to business enterprises. Indeed, the majority opinion has only interpreted the constitutional provisions. The verdict, however, disconcerts and disorients the quest for a harmonised national market which led to the landmark 2016 constitutional amendment to usher in the goods and services tax (GST). It will not be out of context to envision that emboldened by the decision some states may assert taxing rights on natural resources, which, if conceded to, will fuel inflation and have a cascading effect. In the process, it could disturb the financial equilibrium arising from the successful implementation of the GST. A similar situation had arisen in 2016 when another nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court had upheld the states' power to levy entry tax. Thankfully, by then, the GST design was in place and state levies and entry taxes were subsumed in the GST. However, the present situation is different, in the sense that on mineral taxes it would require significant cajoling (of the

mineral-rich states) by the Centre and other states combined in the GST Council.

The vindication of this separate right of states to tax minerals may hopefully turn out to be a stepping stone to reforming the indirect tax regime

The vindication of this separate right of states to tax minerals may hopefully turn out to be a stepping stone to reforming the indirect tax regime. A review of the constitutional remit of the GST Council reveals that it is within its prerogative to subsume additional taxes within the scope of the GST, although a “consensus” approach will not be easy. Thus, buoyed by some degree of political and financial bargain, the members of the GST Council may display statesmanship to support subsuming of such levies within the GST. Such convergence of interests will be conducive not just for Centre-state relations but also protect consumers from the cascading effect (on account of an additional levy) and businesses from the consequences of such levies.

The fact that this levy affects national priorities finds an acute resonance in the minority opinion; it clearly reveals that the ramifications of the states' assertion of an independent taxing right are not a figment of imagination and, instead, perceived even by trained judicial minds who are otherwise impervious to the economic consequences of their decisions. One would hope that the overriding priorities of national growth and citizens' aspirations are weighed in by the stakeholders to maintain economic tranquillity, notwithstanding the judicial elocution on the mineral taxation rights of states.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Inclusive quota

With a Supreme Court bench allowing sub-categorisation within the Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) categories, a new political agenda is on the boil. Sub-categories, executed transparently, will help make the SC/ST quota more inclusive by embracing those lacking in social capital. Punjab, with 32% SC population, created sub-quotas in 1975 and reserved 50% SC quota for

Valmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs. An apex court order in 2004 cancelled such a sub-quota, a decision overturned by the same court now. Sub-quotas alone cannot address discrimination or job scarcity. Addressing disparity in schools and workplaces as a policy remains tough. Public sector jobs are few and private sector jobs are subtle. There are about 1,200 SC and 715 ST categories. Each of these must be scrutinised for socio-economic data. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### Escalating Gaza war

It is clear from the assassinations of Hamas' top leaders Ismail Haniyeh and Mohammed Deif and Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukur against the backdrop of its genocidal war on Gaza that Israel is a law unto itself and crosses red lines at will and with impunity. The series of extraterritorial assassinations have dashed our hopes of a long overdue ceasefire deal in Gaza and fuelled fears of a wider war.

Israel must end its illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, as told by the International Court of Justice, for the “axis of resistance” to lose its relevance. The international community must apply the necessary pressure on Israel to stop the war on Gaza and its attacks elsewhere in the Middle East, and a just peace deal should be brokered. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

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DECCAN Chronicle

3 AUGUST 2024

# Challenges remain after SC landmark sub-quota ruling

In a seminal ruling on continuing affirmative action, the Supreme Court authorised state governments to create sub-classifications within the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for preferential reservation that can do much to lift the more marginalised communities. The decision allows the creation of sub-classifications to tackle graded inequalities among people who do not constitute a homogeneous class.

What the verdict seeks to address is the inequality within quotas as most reservations are taken away by the creamy layer within those communities. Introducing a variable level of reservation within SC/ST quotas may be likened to the opening of a Pandora's Box, but such is the state of reservation after 70 years that corrective action is called for.

The court has shone the spotlight on a tricky issue of a section of people and their succeeding generations monopolising the quota at the cost of more marginalised people within their own communities. The intrinsic elements of social justice, as envisaged by those who gave shape to national reservation policies in education and jobs in the public sector, may have been upheld in the ruling, but it comes with a warning that those policies have not uniformly served all the marginalised.

There is a provision in the quotas for OBCs that prevents the creamy layer from monopolising quotas, but no such rule exists in the SC/ST reservations. What the court is suggesting is that this can be addressed provided there is solid empirical data backing up the claims of people of more than 150 sub-classifications who have been kept out while generations of the same extended families have enjoyed the fruits.

In a country whose data is always looked upon with suspicion, it is a tall order to ask governments to provide realistic figures to support claims of SC/ST sub-classifications amid a clamour for a piece of the affirmative action. Politicians, inured to creating divisions and subdivisions to make and keep vote banks, will not hesitate to play one class of people against the other, which is why court-monitored permissions are essential to make these contemplated changes work.

Two decades may have been lost already as a 2004 decision by a five-judge bench of the top court ruled in the *E.V. Chinniah vs Andhra Pradesh* case that sub-classification was not allowed on the grounds that SC/STs constitute homogenous classes. Considering the huge variables within broad SC/ST classifications, this has been rightly struck down now.

The anxieties will now rest on how politicians governing the people respond when having to choose certain classes of people over others who are just like them but only more privileged because they had gamed the system for decades. Considering that sub-classification of SC/ST can run to a count of around 2,000 communities, the space for manoeuvring and politics becomes immense.

Can politicians be trusted to make rational criteria work when it comes to having to choose or will they allow caste considerations to create more prejudices in an already crowded scene clouded by the fact that the number of jobs available in the public sector is no match for the number of people seeking a livelihood with some assurance of a secure future?

## US-Russia ties: A brief thaw?

In a throwback to the dark days of the Cold War, a plane landed late at night in Turkey to offload prisoners from Russia to be whisked off to an US Air Force plane for the journey to a military base in Washington.

In what was seen as the briefest sign of a thaw in some of the most adversarial ties in history since the days of the Soviet Union with the US, as many as 24 people were exchanged between Moscow and the West.

Even so, it is being said that not too much is to be read into this historic prisoner exchange which freed the likes of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter and a former US Marine. This is being seen as a one-off exchange that followed months of delicate negotiations involving Slovenia, Germany, Norway, Poland and Turkey with the US President Joe Biden.

Mr Biden, who has withdrawn from the presidential race, exulted in a rare diplomatic triumph at a time when a war is being fought by Russia in Europe even as the US and the West have ranged behind Ukraine against Mr Vladimir Putin.

It is said Mr Biden took interest in the final negotiations the same evening that he was grappling with the idea of giving up his run for the White House. Of course, Mr Donald Trump derided the whole swap deal saying had he been President Mr Putin would have released US prisoners without an exchange.

Among those released is also convicted political assassin Vadim Krasikov who was working for Russia's state security service when he disposed of a Chechen rebel in Berlin five years ago. But the reason such a compromise was being struck now was reportedly the capture in Slovenia of two Russian sleeper agents who Mr Putin wanted brought back home to safety.

The release of 16 prisoners from the horrendous conditions of Russian jails comes as a boon for a couple of American journalists who may have had little to do with spying, five Germans and for seven Russian citizens, too, who were political prisoners in their own country.

A kind of "Mission Impossible" has achieved, but it is a pity the breakthrough may not lead to any greater defrosting in US-Russia ties, which the world sorely needs when Mr Biden's agenda, as he seeks a spectacular ending to his four years in the White House that began in Covid-hit times, would be to negotiate an end to two draining wars in Ukraine and Gaza.



# Lessons from rain tragedy: Can we make cities safer?



Patralekha Chatterjee

Dev 360

**L**ibraries are gateways to knowledge. But what happens when these safe havens for readers and scholars turn into death traps?

On July 27, Shreya Yadav, Nivin Dalwin and Tanya Soni, all in their twenties, drowned in a flooded basement library in Delhi's Old Rajinder Nagar. The three UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) aspirants were students at the Rau's IAS Study Circle, a civil services examination coaching centre. The institute's library was in the basement, without official sanction. As per the norms laid down in the Master Plan of Delhi 2021, the institute had permission to use its basement only as a storage, parking, and utility area.

On the fateful day, it rained heavily in the neighbourhood while many other parts of the city remained dry. This was not the first time that rainwater had flooded the basement library but torrential rain along with multiple levels of mismanagement and illegalities made it a ferocious surge this time. The roads outside got waterlogged. Encroachments obstructed the stormwater drains in the area. Ramps blocked the entry of rainwater into drains. A report by engineers of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi alleges that a vehicle passing through the waterlogged area triggered such waves that a gate of the institute broke down, forcing the rainwater to flood the basement library.

Thirty odd students in the library managed to get out with great difficulty but Shreya, Tanya and Nivin remained trapped. The three succumbed to death by drowning in rainwater.

The investigations are continuing.

How do we process flooded basement libraries and death by drowning in

India's capital city? I never feared the rain. It was the stuff of romance, poetry, music. Now, a gnawing fear grips me when it starts raining heavily. Even if I am not directly affected, I cannot stop thinking that someone, somewhere may be trapped in a flooded basement, breathing their last. Survivors' accounts capture the terror and the sheer powerlessness of those trapped in swirling waters inside a closed space. If this can happen in India's capital city, just imagine the situation of small towns?

The tragic and utterly preventable deaths of three young Indians at the prime of their lives have ignited multiple conversations. A key one relates to governance. Unsurprisingly, in hyper-polarised India, even a tragedy or a disaster fuels a fierce blame game. A verbal slugfest has started out between the Aam Aadmi Party, which currently controls the Delhi government as well as the civic body (Municipal Corporation of Delhi, MCD) and the Bharatiya Janata Party, which calls the shots at the Centre, controls the Delhi police (under the Union home ministry) and which would love to wrest back power from its rival and an Opposition party.

No one comes out of this smelling of roses. And as citizens, we must not let the blame game distract us from the core issue — the widespread acceptance of illegalities and violations of safety norms. Rau's IAS Study Circle was by no means an outlier. Ground reports by the media paint a chilling picture. It is not one or two or three. Dozens of coaching centres across Delhi are guilty of gross violations of building laws and safety norms. Many classrooms and libraries in basements had no fire or emergency exits, electricity meters; there were mangled wires and narrow

**The institute's library was in the basement, without official sanction. As per the norms laid down in the Master Plan of Delhi 2021, it was to be used only as a storage, parking and utility area.**

staircases. A recent report in a national newspaper noted that even the newer buildings in one locality were setting up libraries and classrooms in basements illegally instead of taking steps to create safer surroundings for students.

All this points to unconscionable negligence or complicity of various government agencies. A student had alerted the Centre, the Delhi government, and the MCD earlier about Rau's illegal use of the basement and lack of safety norms. Nothing much happened. One also wonders how the local police were unaware of gross violations of safety norms when many institutes were a stone's throw from police stations.

Death by drowning inside a library is a first, but many of these places were also fire hazards. Last year, a fire broke out at a UPSC coaching centre at Mukherjee Nagar in north Delhi. Sixty-one students, as well as a few others, suffered burn injuries on their arms, neck and legs and had to be hospitalised.

There are death traps everywhere. And it is not just flooded basements. There are collapsing bridges; there are flyovers that cave in, and canopies at airports that collapse. The common thread running through all of these fuses the illegalities, violations of safety norms, and an utter disregard for lives and the well-being of ordinary Indians.

It is easy to pin the blame on heavy rain. But in the time of climate change which fuels erratic and extreme weather, bursts of heavy rain are becoming the norm even in a semi-arid city like Delhi. That is the reality.

Which brings one to urban floods which are

becoming very common.

How is India dealing with urban floods, which not only puts lives at risk but also disrupts the economy? By all accounts, not too well. We have seen this in many Indian cities in recent times. What do losses mean to India's cities crippled by waterlogging year after year? By 2036, there will be 600 million Indians living in towns and cities. That is 40 per cent of the population. Urban areas contribute almost 70 per cent of the country's GDP. The reckless urban expansion, inadequate drainage systems, poor maintenance, and illegalities galore will extract a steeper price as extreme and erratic weather become more frequent.

While the government talks about Smart Cities, the reality points to unliveable cities. The drowning of the three students in Delhi's flooded basement starkly illustrates how cities can become unliveable and unsafe when there is reckless unplanned growth, violating all safety norms.

At the time of writing, over 200 students are protesting outside Rau's IAS Study Circle and have started an indefinite hungerstrike. They are demanding ₹1 crore compensation for each victim's family, transparency in the ongoing investigations and a permanent solution to the drainage problems and a safety audit of all coaching institutes along with a cap on their fees. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi is cracking down on basements of coaching centres used for unauthorised purposes. The police have made several arrests.

With disasters happening with monotonous regularity, the deaths by drowning could soon become yesterday's news.

But the danger remains unless we say "no" to rampant illegalities which generate death traps. There cannot be a trade-off between human lives and profits even if they lead to economic growth.

*The writer focuses on development issues in India and emerging economies. She can be reached at patralekha.chatterjee@gmail.com.*

## LETTERS WORST PARLIAMENT EVER

I am now in my eighties and following Parliament proceedings for over 60 years. There were stalwarts like Bupesh Gupta, Ashok Mehta, N. Dandekar, S.A Dange and many others who by their oratory and debating skills made Parliament a true 'House of Wisdom and Enlightenment'.

Comparing Parliaments of bygone eras with the ones in the 16th, 17th and now 18th Parliament, deterioration and decline are there for all to see. I have no hesitation to say that the opposition in the present Parliament is the worst one and doubt if even God will be able to save our Democracy.

S.Nagarajan Iyer Coimbatore

## VICE PRESIDENT'S CONDUCT

The RSS has found a hardcore pracharak in someone holding the second highest position in the country. Jagdeep Dhankhar, Vice President and Chairman of the Rajya Sabha has gone out of the way to praise the RSS by endorsing it in the Rajya Sabha. When he has openly declared his undiluted affinity and loyalty to the RSS and in turn to the BJP, how can the opposition parties expect him to conduct the proceedings in the Rajya Sabha in an impartial manner as its Chairman? The Vice President is expected to treat all citizens as equals in every respect, but Dhankhar with his statements, has belied these expectations.

Tharcus S. Fernando Chennai

## WAIVE GST ON INSURANCE

It is heartening to note we have at least one Minister who is concerned about the plight of the common man, especially senior citizens, who have been begging the finance minister to waive GST on medical insurance premiums, but she has been silent for the past couple of years. We hope she would at least heed the request of Nitin Gadkari and pass orders to waive the GST on Insurance premiums and help senior citizens, who are paying premium through their nose.

N. Mahadevan Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

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**Farrukh Dhondy**  
**Cabbages & Kings**  
 Britain's NHS, the nation's pride, may be broken, but it's kind and caring...

"We came in odd disguises To watch the ruined orphans Collecting consolation prizes And observing the world's spectacle We slunk away in shame Shunning shades of contrition That didn't even have a name!"  
 — From **Sir Ji Kul Blues**, by Bachchoo

The British National Health Service is now broken. The institution which gives treatment free for all illnesses has been the pride of the nation, but has suffered in the last 14 years of Tory rule from under-financing, bad management, crony contracts to Tory donors, friends and businessmen during the Covid-19 pandemic... etc.

Its doctors, nurses and service staff are not to blame. This from experience.

Gentle reader, I am writing this sitting in a waiting room in a London hospital. Through an unknown cause — perhaps the undetected bite of a poisonous spider, I developed an infection under the skin of my lower back. Through the last ten days I have spent five, then ten and today, already, seven hours in the "Accident and Emergency" department of the hospital. The origin of the word "patient" is now clear: They also serve who hang about and wait for medical attention. The

days recede... Once you are seen, the staff are immaculately kind and caring and so here I am waiting for a bed to come vacant in an appropriate ward — perhaps till past midnight — as the surgeon who lanced the subcutaneous infection wants to monitor it for the next few days and chase it with intravenous antibiotics. I include these details, not through any self-pitying indulgence, being the least sick of my fellow travellers, but to tell you that the NHS cares and is careful.

And to say that it did occur to me what this same procedure would have cost me if I "went private" and paid for the diagnosis and treatment. Both would have been by appointment, so no hanging around in crowded desperation. Estimate: £2,500! (over ₹250,000). I can't be sure but it is highly likely that Hedgie Sunak and family and other Tory ministers and cronies use private medicine or they are given very special, smooth treatment by the NHS. And the other 67 million of us in the population, Hedgie-walla?

It's not first time I have put myself in the hands of the NHS and had several adventures.

After my first year in Cambridge in the mid-1960s I came down to London to start an overland journey by bus and hitch-hike to India. I slept on floor of Adil Jussawalla's tiny bed-sitter while I and my trip-mate gathered visas for the interven-

ing countries. I woke up one day with a swollen neck. Mumps! I had to go into isolation in the West Brompton hospital. Friends lent me a radio and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. A middle-aged Spanish lady would, twice a day, push a tea trolley through the wards saying "Cup-o-tea, cup-o-tea..." as she went.

We got talking and in a mischievous moment I said to her "don't say 'Capote', say 'Truman'." The poor woman did — until the head nurse stormed into my cubicle saying: "How dare you... blah blah". Very angry, very abusive and, of course (curse?), perfectly justified. I said I was contrite and the next afternoon I showed the Spanish tea-lady the cover of *In Cold Blood*, and to my apologetic relief she thought it was funny.

Not so funny then the next such encounter when I was in bed in a hospital after a car accident with brain concussion, etc. (*We suspected as much — Ed... Eh, don't be so cruel yaar — fl*).

Opposite me in the ward was a young Pakistani lady and in the course of the day we conversed. She ran a cigarette, newspaper and confectionery shop with her husband. Late the first night, a consultant and his team came round and began to question her. She had no idea what he meant when he asked if the symptoms had persisted and had resulted in trauma. After a lot of "No knowing

this, please... sorry...", I intervened and began to translate question and answer to and from Urdu, much to the immediate appreciation of the surgeon and his team. But — ooo! Up came the head matron, shouting hysterically, from the end of the ward.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" In all innocence, I said "translating". She shouted at me. Only professional, vetted translators could do that! If they allowed the likes of me... The consultant surgeon smiled and moved on.

And so, the last episode: sitting in the patients' recreation room of a hospital, there was a Nepalese family — husband, wife and wife's father in the room. I spoke to them. A young lady with a writing pad came in. She spoke to the Gurkha family before approaching me to ask if I was British. I said I had a UK passport. She nodded and noted it down. Then she said: "I hate my job! That old gentleman needs treatment but he isn't British. "Yes, he told me he was visiting his daughter." "So, he has to pay for lodging and treatment by the NHS!" "He fought in the Falklands — hasn't he already paid?" "That's why I hate my job", she said. "Can't you lie?" She smiled, gave me a severe look, and said: "Mr Dhondy, maybe you should do this job!"

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# A museum to board games and memories

Board games carry with them the languor of a sunny winter afternoon or a rainy evening, and intertwined with this sense of time never-ending are family memories as well as stories of history and myth



CULT FRICTION  
SANDIP ROY

Decades ago my cousins visited Kolkata from London for the first time. Though we were first cousins, my sister and I had never actually met them in the flesh. They were just names scrawled at the bottom of annual Christmas cards until as teenagers they decided to come to India without their parents to meet the relatives they had never known. As we faced each other over the gulf of accents and language and culture shock, what helped break the ice was a carrom board.

They had never seen one before but before long we were all playing boisterously for hours, scrubbing the board with dabs of my mother's talcum powder and arguing over whether the striker was being placed correctly. A month later when they returned to England they landed at Heathrow carrying, much to their mother's horror, a carrom board.

Souvik Mukherjee is tapping into that love for board games with the Goutam Sen Memorial Board Game Museum at his home in Ballygunge in Kolkata. Goutam Sen was his father-in-law and an avid chess player who died during the pandemic. The museum which came up in 2023 is a tribute to him, but it goes way beyond chess.

There's no entry fee to the private museum but you need an appointment. Mukherjee, whose day job is in academia, is both the curator and the guide.

"It's a perennial battle against dust," he says apologetically, removing the plastic cover from the display cases. "I have colonised the veranda of the house," he laughs. "But I would like to colonise more territory." As of now, he can display about a tenth of his collection, some 70 games out of a collection

of around 600.

It's like an Ali Baba's cave of wonders except with QR codes. The sound of traffic outside recedes as Mukherjee dives into a world of intrigue and drama laced with chance and strategy. There's the royal game of *Ur*, possibly the oldest board game in the world, discovered in a 4,400-year-old royal tomb in Mesopotamia in the 1930s. Mukherjee has a replica he got from the British Museum in London. "It's a fairly simple two-person game but the rules were discovered much later," he says. "From a Cochin Jewish family who had migrated to Israel. They called the game *Asha*."

Then there's *Senet*, the game of Pharaohs, played with pyramidal dice on a rectangular board of 30 squares, some with hieroglyphics. There's *Go* from Japan, Viking chess from Scandinavia, *Bagh-chal* from Nepal where 15 goats try to evade three tigers on a board. "If a tiger jumps over the goat, it eats the goat. But if there are two goats in a straight line, the tiger can't jump and it's cornered."

Many of the games that are not on display are stacked around the room. One could almost do a timeline of world history through board games. There's a game that talks about racism using slaves and slaveholders, a suffragettes game where players have to evade the police and get to the House of Commons, even a Gandhi game. "You basically play as Congress, Muslim League, the extremists, the British Raj and so on. It's a really intense game with a very thick manual," says Mukherjee. And there's no guarantee Gandhi will win every time.

The games also reflect currents of migration. Games from East Africa end up in south India and then spread around the world. *Parcheesi* was the precursor of *Ludo*, played with cowrie shells as dice. "It was taken to England in the 1890s and patented as *Ludo*," says Mukherjee. "I have a copy of the patent." Next to the *parcheesi* sits its close cousin, *chaupar*, played with long dice. "The actor Jayant Kripalani remembered how their family had a



Board games pre-date cardboard and were often just played by scratching lines in the dirt.

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*chaupar* board and how everyone would swear up a storm while playing it," says Mukherjee. "But the interesting thing was they didn't swear at each other. They would swear at the dice." Incidentally, he does not believe Yudhishthir played *chaupar* in the Mahabharat. That was only in the B. R. Chopra television version.

There is the eternal debate about where chess originated. Mukherjee points to a *chaturanga* board and says the first references to a game like *chaturanga* are in Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*, though the earliest rules he has managed to find are in the 13th century *Chaturanga Dipika*. The board has a king with four armies—horses, chariots, elephants and boats. "That's why in Bengali even now we often call the castle *nauka* or boat," he says.

But the variants of chess Mukherjee has collected—from Incas with llamas facing off against conquistadors to Rus-

sian matryoshka dolls to a Burmese chess set with pagodas and elephants (and no king, only a general because the king thought it was *lèse-majesté* to be represented by a chess piece)—all show that in the end the origin story hardly matters. Humans travelled and the games travelled with them and they absorbed the stories they encountered along the way. The board for these games is essentially the world itself.

Mukherjee's research interest was actually in video games, the very thing that's supposed to have killed board games. "While I was writing my thesis I realised how much Indian heritage there was in these games, particularly in games that told stories," he says. "Then I came across *Gyan Chaupar* and was astounded at the number of variations—Sufi, Bhakti, Golokdham where the winner finally ends up in Baikuntha or heaven. I saw how the West took over *Gyan Chaupar* and turned it into

*Snakes and Ladders*." Soon he was collecting games from all around the world and at one point it dawned on him that he could build an archive. "No one had much interest in building an archive. We don't respect this kind of culture. But it would vanish if no one recorded it."

That attitude comes from our conflicted attitudes towards leisure. Board games pre-date cardboard. They were often just played by scratching lines in the dirt. They were infantilised, regarded as something meant for children or the way women passed time in their chambers. Real men played outdoor games. In his book *Nation at Play—A History of Sport in India*, Ronojoy Sen quotes anthropologists Kendall Blanchard and A. T. Cheska who define sport as a "a physical exertive activity that is aggressively competitive within constraints imposed by definition and rules." Board games don't fit those defi-

nitions. Thus, other than perhaps chess, we felt no need to regard board games with any seriousness. And even chess was often the playground of the effete and indolent like the *navabi shatranj ke khiladi* of Oudh, playing chess while their kingdom fell apart around them.

That reminds Mukherjee of a story about *Fanorona*, a game from Madagascar. A queen of Madagascar kept playing the game because she thought the outcome would tell her the strategy she needed to take against the invading French. "By the time she finished the game, the island was colonised," says Mukherjee.

Indeed board games do carry with them the languor of a sunny winter afternoon or a rainy monsoon evening, a feel of time never-ending. That is probably why so many of us brought our old carrom boards and *Ludo* sets out of dusty hibernation during the covid lockdown. And board game nights for the public have become popular at Mukherjee's museum.

As for that carrom board my cousins carried back, for years it would be dragged out when we visited London. Some of the pieces were lost and replaced by others. After my aunt and uncle died and the house was sold, it was donated to a Bangladeshi family in London. But the story of the carrom board that went to London became part of our family lore although it's only now that I understand my cousins were not just carrying back a board game.

They were carrying the memory of a serendipitous summer, the joy of discovering cousins they never really knew and the ache of not knowing when we would see each other again. And the hope that every time the striker met a counter on the carrom board, it would rekindle that memory.

There was no strategy here. But by some lucky chance we had found family in a board game.

*Cult Friction* is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against. Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

# The original Hindutva icon?

A new biography of Tilak dives into Indian politics of a century ago, the legacy of which stretches to contemporary times

T.C.A. Raghavan

Vaibhav Purandare's study of Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) follows his well-received biographies of V.D. Savarkar and Shivaji. This new book, *Tilak: The Empire's Biggest Enemy*, in a sense, completes the triumvirate of the three interrelated historical legacies that have shaped modern Maharashtra and dramatically impacted national life. As Tilak's last major biography in English appeared perhaps half a century ago, this fresh evaluation of his political career is timely given the tectonic shifts that have since taken place in India's political culture. At least part of the impulse for these changes can be traced back to Tilak's own innovations.

Purandare's early chapters ably embed Tilak in colonial Pune in the second half of the 19th century, a milieu in which the shadow of 1857 and the earlier vanquishing of the Peshwas lay long, and public opinion instinctively shrank from any criticism, however minor, of the colonial state. Completing his under-graduation and a law degree and consciously eschewing the conventional middle-class pursuit of a government job or a legal career, the young Tilak, along with like-minded colleagues, set up a school, a college and a newspaper each in English and Marathi. Somewhat surprisingly, each of these ventures was successful.

Both the school and the college were premised on a good relationship with the colonial authorities and the college was in fact named after the then governor of Bombay James Ferguson. Tilak's association with these educational ventures would, however, end in acrimony with the founding members falling out, largely on account of ego clashes and personality differences. Throughout his treatment, Purandare does not allow his evident admiration for Tilak, or his subject's larger-than-life image in posterity, come in the way of an objective charting of Tilak's



Bal Gangadhar Tilak's house at Sinhagad Fort near Pune.

ISTOCKPHOTO

personality and its impact on the contours of his political life.

Focusing now—in the late 1880s when Tilak was in his early 30s—on his newspapers, Tilak's public profile steadily grew as did controversies around him. He arraigned himself deliberately against protagonists of social reform. To an extent, this was a defensive reaction to an environment created by colonialism in which everything indigenous was devalued. Tilak and others pushed back against this and sought to enhance Indian self-esteem by defending its society and culture.

However, as Purandare also points out, Tilak was "not reform minded" and was essentially conservative by inclination. Inevitably disputes and debates would centre on the status of women—marriage, divorce, rights—and caste. Tilak stood out as a prominent conservative and traditionalist in numerous high-profile cases that punctuate the chronology of this period. Thus, in the famous Rukhmabai case in the 1880s and the proposed Age of Consent law in 1890, Tilak was at the heart of the orthodox reactions. Being a protagonist for tradition further shored up Hindu support—and perhaps more than just upper caste Hindu support.

In mid-1891, amidst Hindu Muslim vio-

lence across Bombay presidency, Tilak's thinking on the use of religion for political mobilisation also crystallised. In Purandare's assessment, religious mobilisation was almost a natural outgrowth of his stand on social issues. Converting a traditional annual Ganapati festival into a quasi-political event followed. Next on the list was an annual mass mobilisation in 1896 on the anniversary of Shivaji's birth.

Both the Ganapati and Shivaji festivals cemented Tilak's position as a mass leader who could draw crowds. Purandare notes that neither was originally anti-colonial in thrust and each was a platform for sectarian mobilisation of Hindus—but the government was worried. Such tactics, plus his innately conservative inclinations, drew criticism from social reformers and from those worried about Hindu-Muslim relations—many of them the principal faces in Indian National Congress (INC).

By the mid-1890s Tilak was himself a rising star in the INC. His stridently nationalist tone and defence of indigenous custom and culture made him appear strikingly different from the Congress's Westernised moderates. To Tilak, their critiques represented both their elitism and their deference and quietism when dealing with the colonial state.

Alongside this, Tilak's views on the British in India were hardening—he saw the Raj, Purandare says, "as intrinsically an abomination, its officials mean, crooked corrupt and casually cruel." Matters were soon to come to a head with the assassination of two British officers in Pune. Not surprisingly, Tilak's writings, his speeches and the editorial stance of his newspapers meant that official disapproval would come down on him hard. He was tried, convicted for sedition—a charge he vehemently denied—and imprisoned for 18 months.

In this phase of his life—from the conviction in 1897 till about 1907—Tilak, Purandare notes, "established himself as the pre-eminent leader of the people's fight for emancipation". What did "emancipation" mean in the first decade of the 20th century? We know that Tilak's political tactics and his stridency set him apart from the moderate nationalists. Yet, as with all major political figures, there is a difference between the intensity of their rhetoric and the substance of their political demands. It is this gap that Purandare could have delved into more deeply, exploring and explaining the substance of how Tilak's demands differed from those of the moderates he so strongly opposed.

The partition of Bengal in 1905—condemned by Indian opinion of all hues—marks the next stage in Tilak's political career. Differences sharpened between the moderates and the "extremists"—the latter supported an all-India boycott of the British, while the former, hoping that the government would heed the popular mood, wanted to play things down and restrict protests to Bengal. Tilak's run-ins with Gopal Krishna Gokhale, in particular, had gradually been increasing in intensity.

To moderates such as Pherozeshah Mehta and Gokhale, the trio of Tilak, Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal (Lal Bal Pal) had somehow to be contained. Tilak by now was the "Lokmanya"—one esteemed by the people. The moderate-extremist differences, underwritten as they were by personality clashes, had become too big to be papered over, and in 1907, the Congress split leaving the colonial government delighted. By mid-1908, Tilak would be facing sedition charges again and sentenced to six years imprisonment and transportation to Mandalay in Burma (now Myanmar). For some time, his defence team had included Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

He returned to his native Pune to even greater popular acclaim. He confronted a changed geopolitical reality with World War I in progress, Muslim opinion alien-

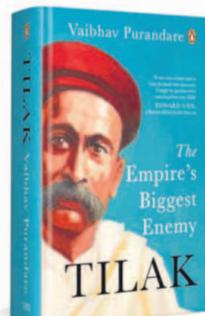
ated from the British over the fate of the crumbling Ottomans in Turkey, and most importantly, a public consensus that the Congress needed to be reunited.

Tilak's responses to each of these may have appeared uncharacteristic, even a departure from his past positions, to the more diehard of his followers. He pledged loyalty to the Raj in Britain's hour of need and clarified that he had never been hostile but had only sought administrative and governance reform. Then he put his weight behind healing the internal rifts in the Congress and the new moderation in his tone and tenor certainly helped bring about a unified Congress in 1916. Most significantly, he was to be the main force with Mohammad Ali Jinnah in reaching what was, in effect, a Hindu-Muslim pact between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to give Muslims greater political representation in relation to their population in elected bodies. Tilak's role in this amounted to a Nixon-visiting-China moment and without his support and initiative, the agreement could never have been reached.

Along with the Congress unification, this Hindu-Muslim accord meant a qualitatively new political situation in the country and Purandare is right to emphasise how these signal achievements in the last phase of Tilak's life merged seamlessly with the Gandhian chapter of mass mobilisation against the colonial state with the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements. Much as Tilak's political style and imagery had made his moderate contemporaries appear timid and deferential, the politics of non-cooperation and mass satyagraha was to supersede Tilak.

Purandare's book delves deeply into Tilak's life, his intellectual interests and most of all his politics. It abounds with other characters—for instance Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and others who merit modern biographers in their own right—who make this book come alive. The dense set of relations—often oppositional and acrimonious—and the nationalist sentiment in which Purandare's Tilak is embedded, makes a distinctive contribution to understanding Indian politics of a century ago and whose legacies stretch to our own times. It is a pity that in such a fine work the publishers thought an index unnecessary.

T.C.A. Raghavan's latest book is *Circles of Freedom: Friendship, Love and Loyalty in the Indian National Struggle (Juggernaut, 2024)*.



**Tilak: The Empire's Biggest Enemy**: By Vaibhav Purandare, Penguin Random House India, 480 pages, ₹999.

# Gender, DSDs and testosterone: issues in Olympic boxing row

**RISHIKA SINGH**  
 NEW DELHI, AUGUST 2

ITALY'S ANGELA Carini withdrew from her Round of 16 boxing bout against Algeria's Imane Khelif after only 46 seconds and a couple of punches to her face on Thursday, triggering the Olympics' biggest controversy yet.

Since her victory, Khelif has been the target of a wave of abuse, with many calling her a "biological man" who had an "unfair advantage" over Carini. Some people also wrongly identified Khelif as a transgender woman.

The participation of trans women, and women having certain "masculine" biological characteristics like higher testosterone levels, in women's sports has long been a subject of polarising debate. Here is a look at the ongoing controversy, in context of the larger debate on the matter.

**Why did Khelif's win spark a controversy?**

In 2023, Khelif and Chinese Taipei boxer Lin Yu-ting were banned from competing in

the International Boxing Association's (IBA's) World Championship in New Delhi after failing a "gender eligibility" test, the details of which remain confidential. The IBA, in a statement on Thursday, said that the two boxers did not "meet eligibility criteria to compete within the female category".

However, both are now competing at the Paris Olympics. This is because the IBA was derecognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) last June over governance and financial issues. In Paris, the IOC-appointed unit which is governing the competition has set very different rules. The only determinant for eligibility is the gender stated in an athlete's passport — Khelif's passport says she is female.

Following Khelif's win, and the subsequent abuse, the IOC said in a statement that all boxers in the Olympics had complied with "the competition's eligibility and entry regulations", and that both Khelif and Lin have participated in women's competitions for many years, including in the Tokyo 2020 Games. It also said that IBA's "arbitrary decision" to ban the two women had been taken



Algeria's Imane Khelif (right) and Italy's Angela Carini after their bout on Thursday. AP/PTI

without following proper procedure.

**Why is gender eligibility a contentious issue in women's sports?**

Modern sports is organised on the basis of sex, with men and women competing in dif-

ferent categories. This is because men, on average, have certain physiological advantages over women.

Sex is determined based on chromosomes, which carry genes. Humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes — 22 are identical in men and women; one, the sex chromosome, is different. The XX sex chromosomes result in the development of female sex organs, and XY in male sex organs.

The SRY gene, found on the Y chromosome, is responsible for the production of testosterone. Multiple studies have attempted to decode the impact that this hormone has on physical characteristics. A 2017 paper ('Circulating Testosterone as the Hormonal Basis of Sex Differences in Athletic Performance') published in the journal *Endocrine Reviews* supported the link between testosterone and athletic performance.

"The available, albeit incomplete, evidence makes it highly likely that the sex difference in circulating testosterone of adults explains most, if not all, the sex differences in sporting performance," it said. This is due to the effect of testosterone in increasing "muscle mass and strength, bone size and

strength (density), and circulating haemoglobin". Other studies also note that data on the matter is inadequate at present.

Crucially, some people born with female reproductive organs may also carry the XY chromosome, in what is known as Swyer syndrome, one of many "Disorders of Sex Development", or DSDs.

This is at the heart of the debate surrounding gender eligibility in women's sports. Many argue that in order to prevent some athletes from having an unfair advantage in women's sports, women with DSDs which facilitate greater testosterone production, and other consequent athletic advantages, must not be allowed to compete with other women.

**How do sports federations deal with this matter?**

In 2021 the IOC decided to leave it to international sports federations to develop their own set of eligibility rules, based on an "evidence-based approach" keeping in mind principles of "fairness", "inclusion", "non-discrimination", "no presumption of advantage", and "prevention of harm". Previously,

it used to take into account testosterone levels — below 10 nanomoles per litre (nmol/L) for women athletes who had transitioned from male to female.

The eligibility regulations of World Athletics still uses testosterone levels as an eligibility determinant. DSD athletes need to keep their testosterone level to below 2.5 nmol/L for at least 24 months before they become eligible to participate in any event. This is stricter than what it was before 2023, when there was a 5 nmol/L restriction for events ranging from 400 metres to a mile, and no restrictions on other events.

FINA, the world swimming body, the International Cycling Union, and the International Rugby Union have all instituted varying degrees of bans on trans women athletes.

At the end of the day, there is still lots that is not known about the impact of testosterone on sporting performance. Many question if the case of women who are born with higher levels of testosterone is any different from that of people with other genetic advantages — like LeBron James' height or Michael Phelps' massive fin-like hands.

**THIS WORD MEANS**

**CHAKRAVYUH**

Military formation mentioned in the Mahabharata

EARLY ON Friday, Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi posted on X that he had inside information that the Enforcement Directorate was planning to raid him because "apparently, 2 in 1 didn't like my Chakravayuh speech".

Criticising the Budget in Parliament, Rahul had said that a "lotus shaped *chakravayuh*" controlled by six men had trapped India's people in the same way that Abhimanyu, Arjuna's young son, had been trapped and killed by the Kauravas in a *chakravayuh* or *padmavyuh* on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.



Abhimanyu in chakravayuh, painted in Kangra style c. 1800-1900. Wikimedia Commons

**Drona's chakravayuh**

Following the fall of Bhishma on the tenth day of the great war, Dronacharya took over the reins of the Kaurava army. After an uninspiring performance in the next two days, Duryodhana, the oldest Kaurava, castigated Drona, reminding him of his vow to vanquish the Pandavas. Drona, embarrassed, decided to deploy the feared military formation of the *chakravayuh*.

Both sides in the war devised and deployed soldiers in various *vyuh*s or military formations. The *vyuh*s were intended to place the most powerful warriors in positions from where they could inflict the most damage, or to meet specific aims of battle. Each formation had specific counters which the other side had to know in order to break through.

The *chakravayuh* was considered the most difficult of such formations because very few warriors knew how to neutralise it. On the Pandava side, only Krishna, Arjuna, and Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra, knew how to penetrate the *chakravayuh*. When Drona deployed the *chakravayuh*, he ensured that the attentions of Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna were diverted elsewhere.

**Tragedy of Abhimanyu**

This left the 16-year-old Abhimanyu as the only one on the Pandava side who could penetrate the *chakravayuh*. However, Abhimanyu only knew how to get inside

the formation, not how to get out.

This was because Abhimanyu had learnt how to enter the *chakravayuh* while he was in his mother's womb — Arjuna was telling his wife about it, but because Subhadra fell asleep halfway through the narration, Abhimanyu could hear only how to get in, not how to get out.

Abhimanyu was as accomplished as a warrior as he was brave — he is often referred to as 'Janmavira', one who is brave from birth, in the *Mahabharata*. So, as the *chakravayuh* swept across the battlefield, ensnaring the Pandava troops in its clutches, Abhimanyu could hear only how to get in, not how to get out. The plan was for other Pandava warriors to follow him, and wreak havoc inside the formation. But that did not happen — stiff resistance by the Kauravas, primarily Jayadratha, and some shrewd planning by Drona meant that the likes of Yudhishtira and Bhima were successfully held off while Abhimanyu was trapped inside, alone.

The young warrior fought like a lion, killing many Kauravas, including Duryodhana's son Lakshmana, and gravely injured Duryodhana and Dushasana. Finally, six Kaurava warriors attacked Abhimanyu all at once, breaking the rules of ethical war. Outnumbered and exhausted, Abhimanyu succumbed. **ENS**



SHUBHAJIT ROY

HAMAS KILLED around 1,200 Israelis and took 250 hostage on October 7, 2023, and Israel's response with air strikes and ground operations is estimated to have killed more than 40,000 people in Gaza so far. But all these deaths — including those of thousands of Palestinian women and children — could ultimately prove less consequential than those of three individuals, news of whose killings became known this week.

Fuad Shukur, a top Hezbollah commander, was killed in Lebanon's capital Beirut in an Israeli airstrike on July 30. Israel has said Shukur was behind a rocket attack on Israeli-controlled Golan Heights that killed 12 young people over last weekend.

On July 31, Ismail Haniyeh, head of the political bureau of Hamas and the Qatar-based public face of the group, was killed in Tehran where he was attending the inauguration of the new reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Mohammed Deif, the storied Hamas commander who planned the October 7 attacks, was reported to have been killed in an Israeli strike in Gaza on July 13.

**A show of Israeli intent**

These targeted killings are seen as a huge victory for Israel, which had vowed revenge for the October 7 attacks, a catastrophic failure of its intelligence, operations, and response mechanisms. Its Swords of Iron military offensive in Gaza had the twin objectives of destroying Hamas and freeing the hostages.

By killing Haniyeh and Deif, Israel can claim to have substantially achieved the target of neutralising Hamas. The message for Hamas' surviving top military leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, would be that Israel has the intent and capability to decapitate the militant group at a time and place of its choosing.

Much was said and written on the failures of Mossad after the October 7 humiliation — the successful strikes is a step towards

**EXPLAINED FOREIGN POLICY & STRATEGY**

# After the three killings

The targeted killings of top Hamas and Hezbollah leaders have increased the possibility of all-out war in West Asia to perhaps its highest level since the October 7 attacks on Israel. What could Iran do now?



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meets with Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas in Tehran on July 30, the day before his assassination. Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader/WANA handout via Reuters

salvaging the reputational damage that Israel suffered.

**A message for Iran**

But the killings could have consequences for all of West Asia. By targeting the leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas — both groups are part of the 'Axis of Resistance' sponsored by Iran — Israel has redrawn the red lines of the conflict in West Asia. The possibility of all-out war in the region is perhaps the highest now since the October 7 attacks.

Israel had demonstrated its willingness to push harder when it attacked Iranian military officials in an Iranian diplomatic premises in Syria's capital Damascus in April. Tehran retaliated with a massive aerial attack against Israel that could, however, do only limited damage. Israel then conducted an air strike against Iran — again, with no major casualties.

These events in April signalled Iran's intent to respond if its military officials were targeted. Israel took the message — Haniyeh was killed while he was inside a building in Tehran, but no Iranian military personnel were harmed in the highly targeted hit.

What it did though, was to expose the vulnerabilities of Iran's intelligence and security establishment in much the same way as the Hamas attack had exposed and em-

barrassed the Israelis. Worse, Haniyeh was killed as Tehran hosted foreign leaders and representatives for the inauguration of its new President.

To target Haniyeh in Qatar, an ally of the United States, would have had complicated consequences for Israel. By killing him under the nose of the Iran Revolutionary Guards Corps in Tehran, Israel has sent the message that Iran's security umbrella cannot protect the leaders of Hamas.

The killing of Fuad Shukur in Hezbollah's stronghold of Beirut delivers a similar message. The military capabilities of the Iranian proxy in Lebanon across Israel's northern border are in fact more formidable than those of Hamas.

**Options before Tehran**

While the three targeted assassinations and Israel's ruthless military response in Gaza is intended to re-establish its deterrence against Iran and its proxies, Tehran cannot be expected to take it lying down. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Pezeshkian have vowed revenge. Khamenei attended Haniyeh's funeral in Tehran, and Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Bin Ahmad Al Thani sat in front during the last rites in Doha, where the body was brought. There are three scenarios on the possible

Iranian response.

**FIRST**, Iran could consider picking targets on Israeli soil and carry out a repeat of the aerial attacks of April.

**SECOND**, it could coordinate with its partners in the 'Axis of Resistance' — the three Hs, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis — to conduct coordinated attacks on Israeli targets.

**THIRD**, it might target Israeli officials in three countries, perhaps after waiting for some time.

**The view from India**

All these three potential options for Iran present concerns for India. The first two scenarios carry the risk of combustion into a broader regional conflict, adversely impacting the safety of Indian citizens in West Asia, and India's energy security.

About 9 million Indian nationals live and work in the region — these are usually people who are the sole breadwinners for their families, and the largest source of remittances to India. And about two-thirds of India's crude oil and natural gas imports come from the West Asian region — an outbreak of hostilities will directly impact the price of crude oil.

The third scenario is one with which India is already familiar — the wife of an Israeli diplomat was attacked in New Delhi in 2012 — and which presents a difficult diplomatic challenge.

India has so far made no statements on the volatile situation — New Delhi, which has friends across the region, does not want to get drawn into regional rivalries. It has issued travel advisories for Israel and Lebanon, and Indian airlines have avoided flying in the region.

Other countries in the region have launched efforts to de-escalate the situation. The Saudi, Qatari, and Omani foreign ministers have been in touch with their Iranian counterparts.

The assassinations have almost certainly derailed ongoing efforts for a deal on hostages and ceasefire in Gaza. The conflict has been prolonged further, and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been facing tough questions on his leadership, has got some time.

But the immediate diplomatic challenge is to avert full-scale war in the region. Much will depend on how Khamenei and Pezeshkian think and respond to the situation.

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# What are the legal challenges to Great Nicobar infrastructure project?

**NIKHIL GHANEKAR**  
 NEW DELHI, AUGUST 2

CONCLUSIONS OF a report by a high-powered committee (HPC), formed by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to review the green clearances for the mega infrastructure project at Great Nicobar Island, were submitted to NGT's Kolkata Bench by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd (ANIIDCO) last week. ANIIDCO is the implementing agency of the project.

The report concluded that the proposed transshipment port, part of the project, does not fall in Island Coastal Regulation Zone-IA (ICRZ-IA), where ports are prohibited, but in ICRZ-IB, where they are permitted.

The HPC was formed in response to the appeals filed before the Kolkata Bench of NGT in 2022, challenging the green clearances for the Rs 72,000-crore infra upgrade, which the

government considers of vital importance to India's national security.

Currently, the NGT's Kolkata Bench is hearing two other petitions about the project that involves the construction of not only a port but also an airport and a township. The Calcutta High Court is also hearing a case regarding the project.

**EXPLAINED LAW**

**What pleas led to the formation of HPC?**

In late 2022, environmental activist Ashish Kothari and Conservation Action Trust (CAT), a nonprofit environmental organisation, challenged before the NGT's Kolkata Bench the environmental clearance and Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) — the area up to 500 m from the high-tide line — clearance granted to the project. CAT filed a separate appeal challenging the forest clearance for the project before the same Bench.

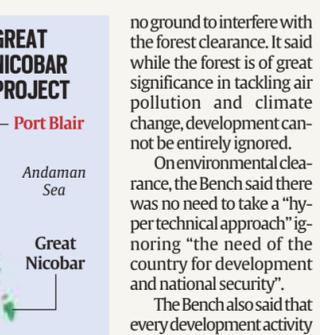
The appeals centred on the irreversible

damage that the project would cause to Great Nicobar's biodiversity; inadequate environmental impact studies and opacity in the clearance process; inadequate assessment of impact on Shompen and Nicobarese tribal communities; and non-compliance of due process in granting statutory clearances.

They also challenged the permissions for building ports and townships in prohibited and ecologically sensitive areas such as ICRZ-IA.

**How did the NGT respond?**

Although the appeals were filed before the NGT's Kolkata Bench, the final order was given by a special six-member Bench of the NGT. The special Bench ruled that there was



no ground to interfere with the forest clearance. It said while the forest is of great significance in tackling air pollution and climate change, development cannot be entirely ignored.

On environmental clearance, the Bench said there was no need to take a "hyper-technical approach" ignoring "the need of the country for development and national security".

The Bench also said that every development activity has some adverse impacts, but if they are mitigated and its advantages to society are greater, such a project has to be allowed in larger public interest.

However, the Bench pointed to "unanswered deficiencies" regarding coral conservation, the location of the port in ICRZ-IA (the prohibited area), and on limited base-

line data collection. To examine these concerns, the HPC headed by the Secretary of the Environment Ministry was formed. The report was submitted in July 2024.

**What is the case in Calcutta HC?**

Soon after this ruling, CAT filed a petition in the Calcutta HC. It argued that the NGT's special Bench should not have got involved in the case pertaining to the challenge against the forest clearance as the special Bench did not have jurisdiction over the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The NGT's Kolkata Bench has the jurisdiction, the petition said.

It also alleged that the NGT failed to critically evaluate the project's clearances as it was "blinded by the mention of the strategic importance of the project". The plea added that by forming an HPC to revisit the project's environmental clearance, the NGT had dele-

gated its decision. The plea referred to a Supreme Court order, which said that the NGT cannot "abdicate its judicial functions to an administrative expert committee".

**What are the other pleas before NGT?**

In May 2024, Kothari filed two petitions before the NGT's Kolkata Bench. One of them claimed that the project violated the 2019 ICRZ notification — it provides for the protection of coastal stretches in Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep Islands. The petition also alleged that ANIIDCO and the Ministry were not complying with NGT's April 2023 order to exclude the construction work in areas which fall under the ICRZ-IA classification.

The other petition alleged that the Ministry had not communicated any details of the HPC's proceedings, which violated the NGT's April 2023 order.

On July 26, ANIIDCO filed a counter affidavit to these petitions and MoEFCC sought more time to file its response.



# The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## LAYING A NEW FIELD

A private sector venture focusing on technologies to grow rice by direct seeding, wheat through zero tillage, is welcome

PRIVATE SECTOR INVESTMENT in agriculture technologies — those helping boost crop yields or cutting production costs for Indian farmers — has been halting in the last decade or more. This is unlike in the first two decades after liberalisation, which saw a host of agronomic interventions — from hybrid seeds in vegetables and maize, genetically modified (GM) Bt cotton, tissue-culture and high-density planting of fruit crops, drip irrigation and laser land leveling, to fast-growing broiler chicken and layer breeder birds. These were all introduced by private players, both Indian (Mahyco, Jain Irrigation, Venky's, Suguna) and multinational (Monsanto/Bayer, Syngenta, Pioneer/Corteva). That flow of innovations has slowed considerably. One reason was an extended period of low farm prices following the collapse of a decade-long global commodity boom in 2013-14. No less important, though, has been the Luddite turn in domestic policymaking — the promotion of paramparagat krishi (organic farming) being combined with blocking not just the commercialisation, but even open-field trials, of new GM crops.

Against this background, RiceTec and Mahyco forming a joint venture focusing on technologies to grow rice by direct seeding (instead of transplanting and flooding of fields) and wheat through zero tillage (without burning stubble from the previous paddy crop and land preparation before sowing) is significant — and welcome. Breeding in rice and wheat, which are largely self-pollinating crops less amenable to hybridisation, has traditionally been a public sector monopoly in India. Two major private seed companies coming together to pool their expertise — RiceTec's in rice and Mahyco's in wheat — and make the farming of the two crops "more climate-smart and sustainable" is, therefore, significant. The flooding of paddy fields and repeated ploughings for wheat is done by farmers primarily to control weeds. The two companies have developed rice and wheat hybrids/varieties containing a mutated gene, whose altered DNA sequence enables their plants to "tolerate" the application of Imazethapyr, a herbicide effective against a wide range of weeds. By spraying this herbicide, farmers would save a lot of water and labour required in rice transplanting-cum-puddling, besides fuel costs and time in preparing the field for wheat sowing. And there would be no need to burn stubble either.

The welcome part is that the Indian Agricultural Research Institute has also released rice varieties with Imazethapyr-tolerant traits — again introduced through mutation breeding, not GM. The fact that there is competition from the public sector and no foreign genes here (unlike Monsanto's Bollgard Bt cotton) should silence any Luddite opposition to the new technology. In any case, the government should not pay heed to such voices this time. A decade of virtual technology famine has been costly for Indian agriculture and farmers. A country seeking to be atmanirbhar in feeding its people cannot afford one more.

## DIGNITY DENIED

Bureaucratic hurdles in changing gender, name in official documents for transgender persons, betray promise of NALSA

IN THE LANDMARK NALSA vs Union of India judgment of 2014, when Justice K S Radhakrishnan spoke up for transgender persons' right to define their gender identity, he linked it to "the most basic aspects of self-determination, dignity and freedom". No one, he said, "shall be forced to undergo medical procedures, including sex reassignment surgery, sterilisation or hormonal therapy, as a requirement for legal recognition of their gender identity." Ten years on, even as Hyderabad-based IRS officer M Anukathir Surya made headlines when his request for change of name and gender in all official records was accepted by the Centre, stories of several others, as reported in this newspaper, speak of a process of mental agony and humiliation. Demands for proof of gender affirmation surgery and even medical examinations, and threats of job loss show that when it comes to the rights of transgender persons, a lack of empathy still hobbles the system.

Part of the problem lies in contradictions between what the NALSA judgment said and provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Rules, 2020. Under Section 7 of the Act, proof of medical intervention in the form of gender-affirming care (sex reassignment surgeries, hormone therapy, etc) is mandatory if a person wants to apply for a change to "male" or "female" category. Under the Rules, however, physical examinations are outlawed. There are also implementation challenges. In 2023, a response in Lok Sabha by former Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, A Narayanaswamy, revealed that 3,225 applications for transgender identity certificate, out of about 24,000, were pending clearance; in many cases, the delay exceeded the 30-day window mandated by the Rules. Other measures, like setting up transgender persons' wards and washrooms in government hospitals by 2022 and the setting up of transgender welfare boards in every state, too, have seen poor implementation.

A 2015 Lancet study showed that in those whose official documents reflected their self-affirmed gender identity and name, "prevalence of psychological distress was 32 per cent less" compared to those who didn't. They were also 22 per cent less likely to have suicidal thoughts. For a community that lacked legal recognition till a decade ago, and many of whose members don't have access to a social-security net, the continued denial of a self-affirmed identity leads to further marginalisation. Addressing this requires sensitisation campaigns, including for government employees, and plugging implementation gaps. Ten years after NALSA, it is high time all citizens enjoy the fundamental rights to dignity and freedom.

## OLDER AND SURER

At the Paris Olympics, athletes are turning age on its head

OF ALL THE pointless clichés, the one about age being a mere number might just be the most trite. Ageism is an inequity hardwired in the human DNA, its spectre sauntering into conversations and commentaries unbidden — and underterred by the wisdom experience might have wrought or the accomplishments that practice would have garnered. At the Olympics, Diana Taurasi, 42, member of the US women's basketball team, put a finger on it when questions about her retirement came up: "... it (20 years' experience) is an Achilles heel instead of something that is treasured and used as a way forward... Hopefully we can change that narrative."

Taurasi is giving it a good shot but she is not the only one. Giving experience its moment in the spotlight at the world's most vaunted sporting event are a bunch of men and women at ease with their years and their talent. Luxembourg's Ni Xia Lian, 61, the oldest table-tennis player at the event, might have lost to World No 1 Sun Yingsha, 38 years her junior, but her return to competitive sports served as an inspiration to her former Chinese compatriot Zhiying Zeng to take up the game again. Now a Chilean resident, Zeng debuted in the Olympics at 58 this year. There's also Spain's Juan Antonio Jiménez Cobo, a silver medalist at the 2004 Athens Olympics, vying for another medal in dressage at 65.

It is heartening to watch the quiet confidence of these athletes, given the premium placed on youth in sports. There is, of course, a case to be made for fitness in professional games. But one of the best-kept secrets of age is that which youth aspires to: Equanimity. After all, age is the domain of the Pollyannaish, with its awareness that in the end, after a lifetime of trying to fit in, everything and nothing matters. It is enough to have arrived at the party and to have had a ball. As the novelist Margaret Atwood once said, "For years, I wanted to be older, and now I am". Ageism be damned.

# Before the landslide

Wayanad tragedy points to perils of development without respecting the region's carrying capacity



AMITABH KANT

YEARS AGO, WHEN I was posted in Kerala during the initial decades of my service, Wayanad was an idyllic hill station in the lush Western Ghats, known for its vast tea plantations. I had the opportunity to visit Wayanad several times and was always inspired by the warmth and resilience of the people. The origin point of rivers like the Kabini and Chaliyar, the district has dense forest cover. It is also home to various biological reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and national parks.

In the past few days, Wayanad has been in the news for a devastating landslide that claimed hundreds of lives. The landslide, which was triggered by a cloudburst, also resulted in the destruction of homes, with several people trapped under debris. It struck Meppadi, Mundakkai, and Chooralmala and resulted in the collapse of a nearby bridge that was used to enter Attamala in Mundakkai.

The disaster has left more than 300 people dead and over 300 are missing. While heavy rains caused the landslide, the unchecked development driven by tourism and quarrying has significantly disturbed Wayanad's fragile topology.

According to climate experts, the landslide was triggered by extremely heavy rainfall caused by the warming of the Arabian Sea. The southeast Arabian Sea is becoming warmer, leading to atmospheric instability over large parts of the Western Ghat, including Kerala. Rain-laden areas with deep clouds are moving southward, resulting in excessive rain.

In 2011, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, headed by ecologist Madhav Gadgil, demarcated the region as an ecologically sensitive area (ESA). The Gadgil Committee recommended the banning of construction, mining, and quarrying activities in large parts of the Western Ghats, one of the world's eight hottest biodiversity hotspots.

A similar tragedy struck Kerala's hilly regions in 2019. Despite clear warnings from experts, unchecked construction and

tourism-related activities have continued unabated. Wayanad, renowned for its scenic beauty, has become an eco-tourism hotspot, leading to rampant construction activities. Resorts have mushroomed, roads have been constructed, tunnels have been dug and quarrying activities have been undertaken without proper assessment of Wayanad's carrying capacity.

Construction of roads and other infrastructure in such regions should be undertaken with scientific precision, keeping in mind the environmental impact. Unfortunately, the current practices lack these essential precautions, exacerbating the damage caused by landslides.

Nearly half of Kerala comprises hills and mountainous regions with slopes exceeding 20 degrees, making these areas particularly prone to landslides during heavy rains. Beyond making the state climate resilient, it is crucial to evaluate land use changes and development activities in landslide-prone areas. Landslides and flash floods often occur in regions where the impacts of both climate change and human intervention in land use are evident.

A 2022 study on depleting forests in Wayanad revealed that 62 per cent of the district's green cover disappeared between 1950 and 2018, while plantation cover rose by around 1,800 per cent. The study, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, indicated that around 85 per cent of Wayanad's total area was under forest cover until the 1950s. Now, the region is known for its extensive rubber plantations. The intensity of the landslide increased because of the rubber trees, which are less effective in holding soil compared to the dense forest cover of pre-plantation times.

Mindless construction in vulnerable areas has greatly contributed to such disasters across the country, especially in hilly and mountainous zones. Experts have highlighted that extensive construction of roads and culverts in Kerala has not accounted for current rainfall patterns and intensities, re-

lying instead on outdated data. There is a need to consider new risk factors in construction to prevent flash floods, as many structures fail to accommodate river flow, leading to significant destruction. Unscientific construction practices are a major cause of the current devastation.

The Western Ghats have been classified as an ecologically-fragile region. Recent research by experts at the Indian Institute of Science divided the 1.6 lakh sq km of Western Ghats into four ecologically-sensitive regions (ESR). Promoting sustainable land-management practices such as reforestation, controlled deforestation, and sustainable agriculture is crucial to maintaining hillsides stability and reducing soil erosion, thereby mitigating the effects of heavy rains.

In 2018, devastating floods killed more than 400 people across Kerala, destroying homes, forested areas, and infrastructure. In 2020, 65 people, most of them tea plantation workers, were killed when a landslide struck Idukki district. A year later, landslides and floods claimed a high toll of lives in the district again. This time Kottayam was also hit. Landslides and flash floods struck again in 2022.

Kerala, once known for its lush greenery and beautiful monsoons, now faces tragedies caused by weather vagaries during these months. Over the past decade, the state has witnessed numerous climate-induced disasters, underscoring the urgent need for climate-resilient infrastructure.

The Wayanad tragedy is a stark reminder of the delicate balance between nature and human activity. It highlights the dire consequences of neglecting ecological warnings and the pressing need to adopt sustainable development practices to safeguard the environment and the lives that depend on it.

The writer is India's G20 Sherpa and former CEO, NITI Aayog. Views expressed are personal

## EASING THE BURDEN

A review of the Income Tax Act should aim to simplify the tax structure



SURANJALI TANDON

IN 1958, THE Law Commission of India set out to logically arrange the Income Tax Act 1922 in order to simplify it. Experts admitted then that there cannot be any real simplification of the Act without the simplification of the tax structure. Decades on, the goals for income-tax reform remain centred around simplicity and stability. In the last five years, though, there have been efforts to improve the tax structure. Heeding the recommendations of previous tax committees, including the Direct Taxes Code in 2009, the corporate tax-rates were reduced earlier and incentives are being phased out under the new tax regime. Around 58 per cent of corporate taxpayers have opted for the new tax regime, lowering the effective tax rate to 23.26 per cent in 2021-22 as compared to 29.49 per cent in 2017-18. To further streamline the system and attract foreign investment, the corporate tax-rate on foreign companies has now been reduced to 35 per cent and the angel tax has been abolished.

Similarly, personal income-tax slabs are now fewer and simplification of compliance has brought on board more taxpayers. Between assessment years 2019-20 and 2022-23, the number of taxpayers increased from 89.8 to 93.7 million. The current Budget has further reduced the tax rate for incomes below Rs 12 lakh, which will impact more than 80 per cent of individual returns and 51 per cent of the gross income

filed in returns. Although the revenue loss from the proposed direct tax changes is pegged at Rs 29,000 crore, it is less than the revenue foregone on account of current exemptions and deductions.

Despite the reductions in tax rates, the direct tax to GDP ratio has increased. Yet, many believe that India has yet to achieve its tax potential. As the country sets its sights on achieving developed country status by 2047, the question is what tax policy can do next to ensure a balance between growth and equality.

For one, the reform of the capital gains regime is on the agenda. This is in line with global thinking as many countries have attempted to reform the taxation of passive incomes after Covid-19. Interest has been further fueled by the surge in the capital market globally. India is no stranger to this boom with the Nifty 50 delivering a 26.8 per cent return last year. Policymakers in India are also cognisant of the rise in futures and options trading. The Budget proposed an increase in the capital gains tax on equity as well as a higher securities transactions tax on futures and options.

In the assessment year 2022-23, long-term and short-term capital gains made up 11 per cent of the gross incomes reported in tax returns. Around 60 per cent of the long-term capital gains incomes in 2022-23 were above Rs 500 crore and more than

40 per cent of the gains were reported by corporates. Therefore, the higher exemption limit of Rs 1.25 lakh on long-term gains is expected to primarily benefit the lower income category taxpayers, while higher rates on equity and removal of indexation, to the extent it results in higher rates, will help raise revenue from upper deciles of asset holding classes. Moreover, the rationalisation of the rates across asset classes and the removal of indexation benefits suggest that the government no longer seeks to prioritise investments.

An important aspect of certainty in the application of the Income Tax Act is the prevention and resolution of disputes. The Vivad Se Vishwas scheme offers one way to settle long-standing disputes. Shortening the period of reassessment and putting in place higher monetary thresholds for disputes are also ways to keep in check confrontations between taxpayers and the income tax department.

The government has announced its intent to review the IT Act. To fundamentally resolve the source of these disputes requires that the contentious sections of the Act be carefully redrafted. Simplification has been attempted in the past, but it is now hoped that the work over the next six months will help meet all the stated objectives.

The writer is associate professor, NIPFP

## AUGUST 3, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### MINISTERS RESHUFFLED

WHILE THE PRIME Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, has appointed S B Chavan as the new Defence Minister, available information suggests that Sripati Misra, who has vacated Uttar Pradesh chief ministership, will be the new Industry Minister. Chavan takes over the Defence portfolio from R Venkataraman, who has resigned after accepting the Congress (I) ticket for vice-presidentship.

### OPPOSITION'S VP PICK

B C KAMBLE, a former member of the Lok Sabha is the opposition candidate for vice-

presidency. Opposition leaders in Parliament decided to field Kamble since a consensus candidate with the Congress (I) failed to materialise. In a statement, opposition leaders regretted that no representative from the SC, ST or neo-Buddhists had ever been chosen for the office of President or Vice-President.

### MILITANTS KILLED

TWO TERRORISTS WERE killed and seven others, including six activists of the outlawed All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF), were arrested and a country-made bomb and arms were recovered by the police in Punjab during the past 24 hours. According to official re-

ports, two terrorists were killed in an encounter with the police in Amritsar district after they robbed a former sarpanch of a gold ring and Rs 82 in cash and escaped.

### INDIA'S OLYMPIC WIN

INDIA BEAT SPAIN 4-3 in an exciting group 'A' hockey match in the Los Angeles Olympic Games. India led 2-0 at half time. Mervyn Fernandes scored two goals while Hardeep Singh and Shahid scored one apiece. With this victory, India remains unbeaten in group 'A'. On the first day of the rapid fire pistol shooting event, Mohinder Lai with a score of 291 (100-97-94) was placed 23rd.



WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Pakistan must not join the league of states known to clamp down on media rights. Freedom cannot become sacrosanct without political commitment." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

# Elephant in the civil servant's room

Whether or not bureaucrats are banned from joining the RSS, the idea of constitutional democracy is in need of being reinvigorated



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

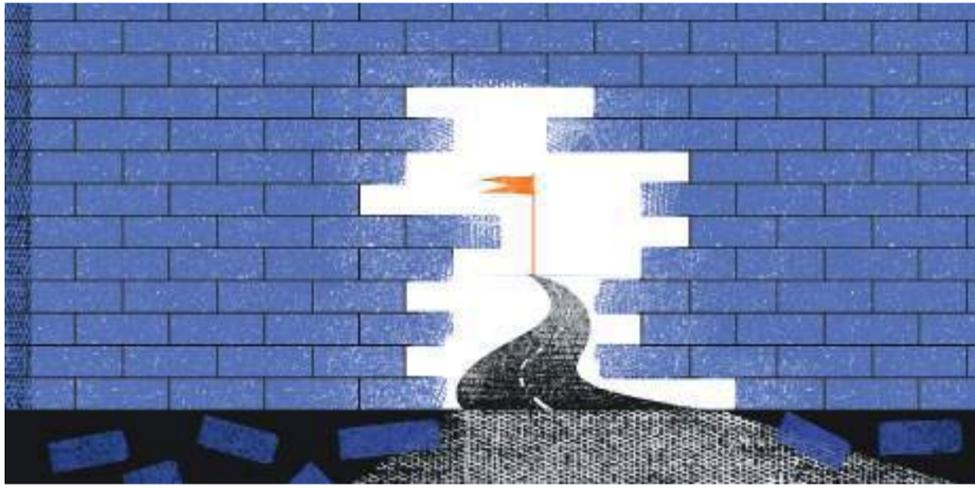
IT IS A matter of some surprise that a government with most of its members being proud members of the RSS took 10 years to lift the ban on government servants joining the organisation. There is no doubt that this decision will make only a nominal difference because civil servants sympathising with the RSS have been aplenty. Now they will adorn the membership openly while in office. With this decision, formalisation of the idea of the Hindu state has been taken one step further. One only hopes that the DoPT does not next ordain all civil servants to attend RSS shakhas on Guru Purnima or participate in the Dussehra rally and upload a selfie.

When an organisation has spread across different walks of life, when judges openly admit their affinity with it, when the ideas of an organisation have penetrated both the self-conscious supporters and gullible onlookers, the formal instrument of not allowing civil servants to join it does not serve any purpose. So, while we are witnessing a caricature of the Weberian model of bureaucracy, the lifting of the ban on civil servants joining RSS might not make much substantive difference. Those who subscribed to its worldview would already have been operating through that prism while in service and their identity too would not be totally unknown to their superiors and to citizens approaching them. By formally revoking restrictions, the government has only underscored the emergence of a de jure Hindu administration. But even if the government did not do that, over time, and increasingly during the last decade, India's state apparatus had de facto donned a Hindu identity. In that sense, the lifting of the ban is less of a legal-judicial issue and more a question of the character of India's public political universe.

Therefore, the real question that the recent decision raises is, once again, of the relationship between the ideology of the RSS and the ideology on which we currently (at least formally) expect institutions in the country to run, viz the Constitution. The juxtaposition between the two is stark and hence, whether formal or de facto, association with the RSS by civil servants jeopardises their commitment to function in accordance with the Constitution.

At a formal level, an organisation that believes in organising one community cannot be worthy of support from the civil servants who are supposed to serve the entire society. More substantively, the RSS does not approve of the way India was restructured after 1947. It believes that "It would have been logical for our post-1947 rulers to re-structure the national life in keeping with our culture. Sadly, that golden opportunity was lost" (<https://www.rss.org/Encyc/2015/3/13/Visi-on-and-Mission.html>). One can only imagine the tension between this sentiment and the duty to uphold the Constitution that arguably was the most systematic and earnest document seeking to restructure India after Independence.

The conflicting visions of a state completely de-linked from religion and a state



CR Sasikumar

based on dharma, defined as the cultural and spiritual legacy of the land, become even more sharply opposed to each other when we take into account the conflict between ideas of the nation. The Constitution is the outcome of an idea that India is a nation comprising different sects, religions and traditions as opposed to the idea that presupposes the foundational role of one religious community as the pillar of the nation. All nationalist rhetoric following the criticality of one religion leads to an exclusionary nationalism that the Constitution consciously rejected.

This conflict needs to be understood beyond formal declarations because in the public sphere the RSS has evolved through a somewhat complex set of ideas and has produced the politics of suspicion, anxiety and animosity through the available democratic space. The formal adherence to democracy by either the parent organisation or many of its "cultural" off-shoots, as also by the political instrument of the organisation, unnecessarily obfuscates the issue of what role Hindutva has played in India's recent past.

For almost a century now, India has witnessed a parallel evolution of politics of two varieties — through two contesting paradigms. Hindutva politics has mostly developed intellectually through the Golwalkar-Savarkar paradigm and democratic politics has been shaped through the Gandhi-Nehru paradigm. While Golwalkar initiated a tendency to uncritically imagine a millennium in the past, Savarkar, while appearing to distance himself from traditionalism, nevertheless employed history as proof of, and justification for, Hindu-ness as the bulwark of nationalism. While formally being away from the RSS, he theorised the quest for force as a morally admissible path for achieving higher goals, something that is the hallmark of contemporary Hindutva. Today's Hindutva is therefore a combination of these apparently distinct approaches. It has promoted ideas of majoritarianism, uncritical traditionalism and orthodoxy combined with crass modernism that upholds force and exclusion as instruments of a distorted nationalist imagination.

In contrast, the Gandhi-Nehru paradigm sought to evolve a nuanced understanding of the past, interpretation of tradition that draws its logical strength from modernity, a self-critical modernity that gave way to the agency of the people and at the same time ensured that

An organisation that believes in organising one community cannot be worthy of support from the civil servants who are supposed to serve the entire society. The RSS does not approve of the way India was restructured after 1947. It believes that 'It would have been logical for our post-1947 rulers to re-structure the national life in keeping with our culture. Sadly, that golden opportunity was lost'. One can only imagine the tension between this sentiment and the duty to uphold the Constitution that arguably was the most systematic and earnest document seeking to restructure India after Independence.

the idea of "public" includes all, irrespective of caste and creed.

Fortuitously for this paradigm, the interventions of BR Ambedkar ensured that it was saved from Gandhi's romanticism about tradition and Nehru's romanticism that democracy will address all ills automatically. This intervention ensured that the Constitution shunned "restructuring of society on the basis of past values" blindly and also ensured that the Constitution will push in the direction of democratic transformation of the social realm. This may be understood as the framework of constitutional morality.

Democracy lives with a perpetual challenge that it must accept the existence of non-democratic, sub-democratic and exclusionary ideas and politics. Indian democracy has struggled with this challenge all through its formal existence for the past seven decades. Organisations and parties that contradict constitutional morality can compete for power and acquire formal governmental power. Politics at variance with constitutional morality can mobilise citizens and gain popular and intellectual traction. Persons having intellectual sympathies with sub-democratic ideas and politics come to hold public offices, such as in the armed forces, bureaucracy and judiciary. The dilemma is whether to ban or abandon such elements. While democracies occasionally need to employ the long arm of the law to protect themselves, legal protection is often weak in the wake of political challenges to constitutional morality.

When democracy is corroded from within and through democratic coups, the first thing that supporters of democracy need to do is to recognise the elephant in the room. India's record in this respect is not strong. For long, many collaborators happily did business with the elephant. That has weakened the system's ability to isolate and tame the challenge. It is necessary to recognise that in the battle between the two paradigms discussed above, the democratic paradigm has received a setback. Whether or not civil servants are banned from joining the RSS, Hindutva is out there and unless the idea of constitutional democracy is reinvigorated, unless it is jealously pursued, propagated and popularised, the proverbial elephant will not go away.

The writer, based in Pune, taught political science

# State's government, Centre's rule

Coaching centre tragedy points to the many ways in which governance in Delhi is hobbled by the Centre's meddling



JASMINE SHAH

THE DEATH OF three UPSC aspirants amidst unprecedented rains in Delhi — due to waterlogging and subsequent flooding of the basement of an IAS coaching centre — has shocked the nation. Reports have revealed that the centre was using a basement to conduct classes in blatant violation of building byelaws and the storm water drain along the road was also encroached upon and covered, making the passage of water difficult. These facts raise deep questions on the greed of the coaching industry, profiting by risking their students' lives, and the role of the municipal bodies that allow such violations to persist.

The incident also brought to the fore the unpreparedness of the National Capital to handle heavy rains, sparking a debate between the AAP-ruled Delhi government and BJP-ruled Centre. Amidst these events, a shocking video surfaced of a review meeting held by a group of AAP ministers on June 28 where the status of desilting of Delhi's drains in preparation for monsoons was discussed. In it, senior-most officers of the Delhi government, including the Chief Secretary (CS) and PWD secretary, were shown video evidence that Delhi's drains weren't desilted — even as officials claimed otherwise on files.

When asked by Minister Saurabh Bhardwaj to join him on a field inspection to ascertain the truth, the PWD secretary said he would be busy with meetings that day and refused to commit any time. Reportedly, when the same Minister asked the CS in May 2024 to share the status of desilting of drains, the CS wrote back saying that the matter was under the consideration of the Delhi High Court to which reports had been submitted. In his note to the Minister, the CS also questioned why the minister desired to review the matter when it was under the consideration of the High Court and that he isn't obliged to respond to the elected government.

Anywhere else in India, such defiance of an elected government would have led to the dismissal of officers. But not in Delhi. Yet, this isn't the first instance. The last few years of the AAP government in Delhi have been marked by an unprecedented and undemocratic assault on its powers by the BJP-ruled Centre that has few parallels in independent India. The BJP has been unable to digest the AAP's historic mandate of 2015 and 2020 in Delhi and its rise as a national party. The Lt Governor (LG) of Delhi — the Centre's appointee — has time and again undermined Delhi's elected government by weaponising the bureaucracy. A prime example is the LG's decision a month ago to dissolve the Dialogue and Development Commission (DDC), the policy think tank of the Delhi government. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's brain-

child, the DDC was established soon after the AAP government came to power in 2015 with a mandate to study innovations globally and advise the government in finding sustainable, people-centric solutions to the critical developmental challenges facing Delhi. Over the past nine years, the DDC has served as a fountainhead for some of the flagship and innovative initiatives implemented by the AAP government, as documented in its publication *70 Innovations, Redefining Governance*. For instance, the DDC led the process of formulation of the landmark Delhi Electric Vehicles Policy 2020, Delhi Solar Energy Policy 2024, Tree Transplantation Policy 2020, and the Rozgar Bazaar jobs portal for Delhi's blue-collar workers in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, among several other reforms.

The DDC could play this role because, right from its inception, it has functioned under the sole jurisdiction of Delhi's elected chief minister, who acted as its chairman. Official notifications giving the Delhi CM the sole jurisdiction over the DDC were approved by the Delhi Cabinet and the previous two LGs of Delhi, Najeeb Jung and Anil Baijal. Yet the present LG, V K Saxena, ordered the bureaucracy to dissolve the commission.

On earlier occasions too, the present LG has breached jurisdictional boundaries to hinder the smooth functioning of the Delhi government. In July 2023, the LG removed over 400 professionals and consultants engaged by Delhi government, including the young professionals engaged under the CM fellowship scheme from top global universities, including IITs and IIMs. In late 2023, the LG ordered the stoppage of salaries and subsequent removal of all contractual staff of Delhi Commission for Women (DCW), bringing their work to a grinding halt. The message behind these actions is clear: The BJP-ruled Centre, acting through the LG, is determined to abuse all powers at its disposal to cripple the functioning of the AAP government.

The reason it is able to do this is because the Centre has usurped control over Delhi's bureaucracy in a blatant violation of the historic 5-0 verdict of a CJI-led constitutional bench of the Supreme Court in May 2023, coming after an arduous eight-year legal battle, that ruled that the officers in Delhi have to follow the directions of the elected government. However, setting aside constitutional morality, the Centre passed an ordinance within eight days, and subsequently a law, nullifying the SC decision. As per this new law, officers in Delhi only need to follow directions of Delhi LG. The AAP government has challenged the constitutionality of this law in the SC, but the matter is yet to be listed — it has been 14 months. The BJP-ruled Centre has used this opportunity to launch a frontal attack on the AAP government by weaponising the bureaucracy.

How long will this siege of the elected government in the National Capital continue? This is a question that will be determined only by the Supreme Court.

The writer is the vice chairperson of Dialogue and Development Commission of Delhi and senior AAP leader



RAM RAJYA BY RAM MADHAV

# Rahul's 'politics of enemies'

His rhetoric on caste is unbecoming of the Leader of Opposition

LEADER OF THE Opposition Rahul Gandhi appears to have chosen to be a destructive force in Parliament. His interventions in the Budget Session suggest that the Congress leader's sole mission is to somehow get under the skin of the ruling party leadership through aggressive arguments and articulation. One example was his flimsy, if not absurd, argument about the "halwa ceremony" before the budget.

Democracies can only be measured by the existence of an Opposition. But the fact is also that there are no ideal democracies in the world. Lenin used to say that there are no morals in politics, only expedience. Expedient politics is all about power and that makes leaders resort to what Michael Ignatieff, former leader of the Canadian Liberal Party, called the "politics of enemies". Once that form of politics begins, then the language, behaviour and tactics of partisan demonisation will begin to dominate the political landscape. Such "politics of enemies" doesn't stop at the gates of political institutions but can spread through conventional and social media and influence citizens at large.

Leaders practising such politics know that people might initially be sceptical about the language and ideas that they are championing. Arguments like "Desh ka halwa bat raha hai aur 73 per cent log hai hi nahi" (In the Budget's halwa ceremony, 73 per cent of the population was not represented) could sound insipid and hysterical to many. But there is a sinister method in this madness.

Leaders know that over time, sheer repetition of such rhetoric will help them dominate the discourse and turn gullible people gradually to their side. All that is needed is a veneer of benignity and sincerity.

Ignatieff makes a profound observation that "what makes the 'politics of enemies' seductive is that its ruthlessness is so often packaged as a defence of democracy itself". Leaders hide behind the specious claim that, after all, their political enemies are enemies of the whole nation because they are threatening to impose tyranny, and hence, as former US Republican Senator Barry Goldwater said in 1964, "extremism in the defence of liberty is no vice."

India has seen a dozen Opposition leaders since Independence. In Rahul Gandhi's own family, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, had been the leaders of Opposition. Rajiv was the youngest at the age of 45 to occupy that coveted post. At 54, Rahul would be the second youngest leader of the Opposition — a post which acquired greater importance in the last few decades after it was accorded the status of a cabinet minister and given a hand in the appointment of senior officials like the CBI director, election commissioners, Lokpal, ED directors and NHRC commissioners. These powers and responsibilities call for greater maturity and balance, and an ability to not trivialise Opposition politics.

From the time a Congress (O) member Ram Subhag Singh became the first leader of

Opposition in 1969, the Lok Sabha had seen stalwarts like Y B Chavan, Jagjivan Ram, Rajiv Gandhi, L K Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, P V Narasimha Rao, Sharad Pawar, Sonia Gandhi and Sushma Swaraj occupying that high office. Most of them conducted themselves with decorum, setting new standards for the functioning of the House. There were occasions when the two sides of the House demonstrated bonhomie, like when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao decided to send the Leader of the Opposition, Vajpayee, as the leader of the Indian delegation to the UN Human Rights Convention in Geneva in 1994. That was the finest moment of the ruling and Opposition parties coming together for a national cause.

The Geneva Human Rights Convention was a very critical moment for India as Pakistan came with all guns blazing on Kashmir. But the Indian side, too, became formidable when cutting across political lines — Vajpayee, Salman Khurshid and Farooq Abdullah launched a united counteroffensive. In the end, Pakistan was forced to withdraw its petition on Kashmir and the victory for the Indian side was so sweet that Hamid Ansari, who was present as India's special representative at the UN, summed up the outcome in a message to Delhi: "The batsman simply refused to play".

It may be a tall order to expect a return to those days. But it may not be ambitious to expect sensitive domestic issues like caste to be dealt with more diligently. Social justice is an important article of faith for the entire coun-

try irrespective of politics. From leaders such as BR Ambedkar and Ram Manohar Lohia, we inherited a vision of social justice, according to which granting every social group its rights leads to a gradual weakening of caste as an institution. Ambedkar wrote a thesis on the annihilation of caste.

Whether or not the caste Census is required will be decided by the political system based on its needs and merits. It is nobody's case to argue that the issue raised by the Leader of the Opposition was wrong. But it may be pertinent to remind him what, occupying the same position, his father Rajiv Gandhi had said in a debate on the Mandal Commission in September 1989. Accusing the National Front government led by VP Singh of causing caste tensions in the country, Rajiv sought to remind that his party, under the leadership of his mother, fought the elections in 1980 on the slogan — "na jaat par, na paat par" (not on caste or creed).

Mandal Commission recommendations were supported by all parties as a social need but what Rajiv Gandhi had said in his speech at that time may be important for his son to remember: "I think nobody in this House will say that the removal of backwardness and the removal of poverty are not part of that national goal. I think, equally nobody in this House will say that the removal of casteism is not part of that national goal. We must remember both".

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS. Views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### A BETTER METRIC

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Deepening justice' (IE, August 2). The seven-judge Supreme Court bench led by Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud, by a 6:1 majority verdict, allowed sub-classification among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for reservation. It underscored the fact that SCs and STs are not homogeneous classes in terms of degree of social backwardness, literacy and stigma of untouchability. As a result, some castes/tribes who are hampered the most by these factors are left out of the race to benefit from reservation and representation. Quota within quota serves the constitutional objective of reservation by ensuring substantive equality and justice to all. Will this judgment be cited to bolster the argument of quota within quota in 33 per cent of women's reservation in the legislature? And will it be extended to political parties/politicians as well?

L R Murmu, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Deepening justice' (IE, August 2). In a significant development, the Supreme Court has ruled that states are constitutionally empowered to make sub-classifications of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) for granting quotas within the reserved category to uplift more underprivileged castes. The court has recognised that SCs are not a homogeneous class. Hence, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. Over the

decades, the quota system has been plagued by the paradox — all are equal, but some are more equal than others. The creamy layer has made the most of reservation from one generation to another, even as the weakest sections have lagged socially and economically. Now, the states should initiate the "quota within quota" exercise in a rational and calibrated manner on the basis of a comprehensive survey. A census has been long overdue.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

### MONSOON MISERY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'When the clouds gather' (IE, August 2). Every year, monsoon becomes a harbinger of misery, mostly for people from the lower economic strata of our society. Construction and maintenance (including regular cleaning) of stormwater drains and removal of unauthorised structures from stormwater passages are given short shrift by the authorities. On the other hand, people's carelessness has only made matters worse. Drains choked with bottles, plastic bags, garbage and unauthorised occupation of stormwater passages are manifestations of this. Another issue that needs the attention of the authorities is their overall approach. Instead of a knee-jerk response, they need to develop a holistic preemptive approach. Urban centres are especially vulnerable. The state and society alike have to come together and prepare.

Manish Mishra, Bhopal

# Hone In on Those Who Need Help Most

Stronger focus on economics for quota-shaping

This week, the Supreme Court allowed state governments to create sub-categories within SCs and STs, allowing benefits of reservations to reach the most needy subgroups within these categories. Economics doesn't provide ready answers to the question of how quotas, or any other form of affirmative action, affect the incentive structure in competitive environments. Both the preferred and non-preferred groups can slacken their effort, respectively, on account of necessity and futility. Yet, there's evidence to suggest a moderate degree of discrimination among two sets of contestants can be designed in public policy to improve incentives on either side of the divide. This causality, however, breaks down if discrimination is stronger (more quotas) or if the contest is among multiple sets (more sub-quotas). Each category of discrimination adds to the interplay of adverse incentives among all the contestants.

The incentive to perform among the preferred group is negatively correlated to the emergence of an even more preferred group within itself. The extra-preferred group will, on its part, have to be induced out of its historical discrimination to match up to performance of the less-preferred group. The non-preferred group will have no reason to perform differently if the overall quota stays intact. The incentive structure splinters with heterogeneous affirmative action. It splinters further when contestants are forced to remain within preference groups. To retain its incentive structure, the top layer of the preferred group must surrender its preference. A golfer's handicap improves with his game.

Subdivision of quotas will have to be a dynamic process to accommodate mobility of the top and bottom layers, and intermediate ones too. The process is an open auction of deprivation subject to judicial review. This is complicated by the politics of preference among competing groups. The most deserving groups may not have the political representation needed to secure their place in the hierarchy of discrimination. Stronger emphasis on economics to establish disadvantage and degree of discrimination it calls for could make the process less tricky. Effects on incentives must also figure in this decision process.

# Mountain-Making Out Of Molehills by Police

Minor offences are, by their very definition, minor offences. But the knack of our law-and-order authorities frequently making a mountain out of a molehill seems to be a feature that goes with the police's other frequent shortcoming: making a molehill out of a mountain — that is, not taking serious crimes committed seriously. Take the arrests of youngsters in Bihar and the separate questioning of a bunch of boys in Gujarat last month ostensibly for waving Palestinian flags ahead of a Muharram procession. The charge? 'Attempting to disturb communal peace.' Talk about the dangers of police straitjacket profiling.

The arrests and questionings were made not on the basis of threat perceptions but solely on a complaint against the video recording of the flag-waving. Supporting an 'international cause' by waving a Palestinian flag isn't even a 'minor offence'. No discord was fomented. But the police — themselves stating that the 'boys had no idea of the conflict in faraway Gaza' — overreacted against yet another set of 'soft targets' engaged in a 'trending' activity for many young people across the world.

Old-fashioned ideas of community policing and neighbourhood engagement makes sense. The police, across states, need to be more connected with the communities that they serve. It helps reduce antagonism between law enforcement and civil society, the two speak the same language, helps nip criminals in the bud, and provides young people with a safe space to blow some steam and engage in perfectly legit activities.

# JUST IN JEST

To keep everyone guessing can take on an art form in politics

# The Mysterious Mr Devesh C Thakur

Politicians love kite-flying. And most of them are darn good at it, too. It's a skill they develop early in their long, never-ending careers to understand which way the wind is blowing and, if need be, quickly adapt to the new political climate. Earlier this week, Devesh Chandra Thakur, JD(U) MP from Sitamarhi, sent a thought balloon drifting over the blue skies of Vaishali, hinting at a small meeting that the RJD candidate hadn't been his only opponent in the recent Lok Sabha elections. He wasn't sure if some of his own party members and alliance partners in BJP were secretly sharpening their knives. In other words, it's The World vs Devesh Chandra Thakur. According to Devesh Chandra Thakur. While his supporters got busy decoding his cryptic message, the 71-year-old ex-party spokesperson added that his electoral victory was all thanks to his personal relationship, work and reputation with voters for the last 25 years. And, then — and here's the twist — Thakur gave a shout-out to Lal Prasad Yadav, yes, the RJD patriarch of auricular hypertrichosis fame, for helping him win his first MLC poll in 2002! Cat plonked among pigeons, Thakur's political messaging, in one stroke, has kept his supporters happy, his seat warm, and his boss — who knows a thing or two about airing grievances at opportune moments — guessing. Politics 101.

Companies worldwide are benefiting from embracing neurodiversity – Indian offices must follow

# It Pays to Think Different



M Muneer & Tumpa Dey

For a growing number of enterprises, DEI — diversity, equity, inclusion — has become a critical pillar of success. It has become mainstream in both corporate and political America that Kamala Harris has become the latest recipient of the slur 'DEI hire', shorthand to describe that the success or power for some people from a marginalised group is unearned, when the term was used by a Republican to describe the Democrat presidential candidate. While much focus has been placed on gender, race and sexual orientation, neurodiversity and neuro-inclusivity are also gaining attention in the DEI spectrum.

Neurodiversity is a popular term describing the fact that there are many variations of human functionality, and each variation needs to be understood and respected. Based on different studies, 15-20% of the human population is neurodiverse — including up to 10% diagnosed with dyslexia, 5% with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), and 1-2% with autism.

A National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (Nimhans) report says that nearly 2 mn Indians are neurodivergent and increasing in rate as an inherent part of human diversity and neurocognitive functioning.

Behaviours classified as 'different' vary widely because of varied expectations of social behaviours and social norms. Neurodiversity is



Institute non-interview methods for assessing, training and managing neurodiverse talent — they don't respond well to usual interviewing methods



Peel-good factor: 'Bond of Union' (1956), M C Escher

better understood with neuro-ableism, the belief that being neurotypical (people with no neurodivergence) is better for performance. Because of this, people who identify as neurodivergent may experience discrimination at workplaces where traditional jobs are typically based on neurotypical demands and habits. This may entail issues with communication styles, sensory processing and social interaction expectations.

Organisations can benefit from the differentiated thought processes of neurodiverse employees in the ever-changing business environment and be future-ready. According to a November 2023 article, 'Building the Neurodiversity Talent Pipeline for the Future of Work', in MIT Sloan Management Review, neurodivergent individuals are highly skilled in creativity, non-linear thinking, systems thinking, capable of hyper-focus and reverse engineering to solve complex problems.

The article has James Mahoney, head of JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work programme, citing an internal study that found autistic employees, when correctly onboarded, demonstrated up to 140% more productivity than neurotypical hires for the same position.

SAP Labs India has found that its Autism at Work initiative has contributed significantly to projects requiring high concentration and detail orientation, resulting in innovative solutions and improved productivity. DXC Tech India says ne-

urodiverse employees have shown exceptional problem-solving skills, particularly in complex data analysis and pattern recognition roles.

Infosys' initiatives resulted in increased retention and engagement. Employees who feel valued and understood are likelier to stay with the company and perform their best. TCS has launched several initiatives to hire such individuals, particularly those with autism. They seem to have excelled in software testing and quality assurance roles.

While such initiatives lead to positive organisational culture and employer-branding, companies like Dell, Caterpillar and Microsoft believe that these programmes help in more ways than just reputational enhancements. For them, productivity gains, quality improvement, a boost in innovative capabilities and a broad increase in employee engagement are real benefits.

What can organisations do to make their environment neuro-inclusive? **Widen the head hunt** Institute non-interview methods for assessing, training and managing neurodiverse talent because they do not respond well to usual interviewing methods. Implementing hiring practices that accommodate the needs of such candi-

tes is essential. Use skill-based assessments and provide clear and structured job descriptions.

**Flexi workspaces as muscle-flexing** HR departments must consider flexible workspaces, noise-cancelling headphones and modified work hours. Offices should ensure that these accommodations are readily available and communicated to all staff. People with autism often fail to maintain eye contact, are easily distracted by conversations and can be self-critical.

Microsoft, for instance, has special recruitment and workforce development initiatives to create a neurodivergent workforce. It provides a practical setting emphasising skill assessments, job competencies, networking and general career development.

**Neurodiversity-positive work environment** Employees should be made aware of neurodivergence through training. This training should include understanding different neurological conditions, effective ways to communicate with neurodivergents, and the importance of empathy and support. Just as it is useful for all employees to have a less toxic workplace, providing a sense of community and advocacy for their needs within the organisation will be helpful for productivity by reducing presenteeism and absenteeism.

However, organisations must remember that unless they create an environment of psychological safety devoid of stereotypes, their methods will end up as decorative solutions to a challenging

problem. Key to all this would be empathy, a pleasant workplace climate and an environment of awareness about neurodivergence.

That needs leadership committed to neurodiversity that actively promotes inclusion at all levels of the organisation. This commitment should be reflected in company policies, practices and culture. The question is, is India increasingly serious about setting global benchmarks?

Muneer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation, and Dey is assistant professor, Institute of Management Technology, Hyderabad



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Living Wisely

SWAMI SUKHABODHANANDA

Friedrich Nietzsche said 'live dangerously'; should a youth practice such a teaching? We should 'live wisely' instead of 'live dangerously'. To live wisely includes living dangerously when needed but also includes many other aspects. In life there are moments when you don't have to live dangerously, and at those moments rejoice and be content with the moment. One has to learn that art.

'They are moments you have to push yourself beyond your limits, and at that moment you have to live dangerously; meaning, you put yourself at risk.

Why do you say that we have to go beyond our limits? Our different mind creates certain limits, and we get limited by them. Be cautious of this fact. When we have a poor self-esteem, then we set poor goals that appear reasonable. These limits imprison us. Hence the expression, 'Learn to be unreasonable'. This means go beyond the limits of your reason that has been polluted by poor self-esteem. All powerful people are unreasonable — not that they are unintelligent, but they are the ones who have gone beyond the limits of a diffident mind.

We think wrongly and then blame the past failure. We should be neither past-oriented, nor future-oriented, nor even present-oriented. We should have a balance of the past, present and future, but live in the present.



LOLLING ON SATURDAY

# 'New World' Alert

When Nasa was preparing for the Apollo mission, some of the training of the astronauts took place on a Navajo reservation. One day, a Navajo elder and his son were herding sheep and came across the space crew. The old man, who spoke only Navajo, asked a question that his son translated: 'What are these guys in the big suits doing?'

A member of the crew said they were practising for their trip to the moon. The old man got all excited and asked if he could send a message to the moon with the astronauts. Recognising a promotional opportunity, the Nasa folks found a tape recorder.

After the old man recorded his message, they asked his son to translate it. He refused. The Nasa PR people brought the tape to the reservation, where the rest of the tribe listened and laughed, but refused to translate the elder's message.

Finally, the Nasa crew called in an official government translator. His translation of the old man's message was, 'Watch out for these guys; they have come to steal your land.'

Repeat Task

Knock, knock. Who's there? Déja. Déja who? Knock, knock.

# Income Disparity Feeds Corruption?



Nidhi Kaicker, Veena S Kulkarni & Raghav Gaiha

Based on the Gallup World Poll Survey for India (2019-23) CMIE Consumer Pyramids Household Survey, income inequality breeds corruption — in both business and government. Once rich, not only is there a strong temptation to become richer, it's also easier (through share market manipulation, political lobbying, etc). Indeed, when people are exposed to highly unequal social contexts, their overall concerns about moral implications of corruption diminish.

Corruption is defined as use of public office for private gain. But this definition leaves out corruption within businesses (e.g., insider trading). So, a more comprehensive definition is use of public resources by executives in both public and private sectors for private gain — without discounting the role of politicians.

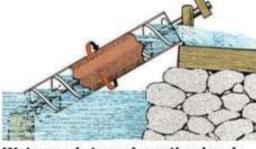
Corruption has risen following globalisation, as natural resources

have become more valuable, and regulatory agencies licensing their allocation more subservient to powerful business interests and public officials. There has been a spectacular spike in income and wealth inequality since 2014. Share of the top 1% in total income in 2022-23 is at its historical highest. The top 1% of income-earners made 22.6% of total pre-tax income, while the bottom half (50% of adults) earns only 15% of the total national income.

Ratio of the share of top 1% of earners to that of the bottom 50% in total income is the [Thomas] Piketty measure' of income inequality. This has risen. But our estimates of the 'Piketty measure' based on GWP surveys reveals a mixed pattern over 2019-23. It spiked in 2020, fell in 2021, rising in 2022, and falling in 2023.

Corruption, based on GWP surveys, shows a rise in its distinct but overlapping manifestations. These estimates are based on perceptions of respondents in these surveys. Respondents answering yes to whether corruption is widespread are added up to arrive at a measure of corruption. So, a statement that corruption has risen essentially means that a higher proportion of respondents perceive that corruption is more widespread.

Proportion of respondents who agree that corruption was widespread



Water made to seek another level

within businesses was high, rising from 77.7% in 2019 to 79% in 2023. Within government, it rose from 72.18% in 2019 to 75.05% in 2023. The intersection between government and businesses was not just high but rose from 65.15% in 2019 to 69.40% in 2023.

So, was income inequality responsible for the rise in corruption? And was the judiciary effective in curbing it? Emphasising that it was fuelled by speculation in the financial and real estate markets, income inequality contributed significantly to corruption in all its manifestations, while a well-functioning judiciary was associated with a significant reduction. Benefits of education — both higher secondary and above — are unambiguous, as it's associated with lower income inequality but higher perception of corruption.

This is hardly surprising, as higher educational attainments expand remunerative employment opportunities and impart the ability to benefit

from them. But the fact that they perceive higher corruption may be explained by their being better informed about insider trading, graft in government, bribery of public officials, lobbying by big businesses, etc.

Efficiency costs of corruption are severe — corruption decreases business activity, raises marginal costs of public funds and hampers growth. But the equity-efficiency trade-off of progressive taxation is often exaggerated. For example, when there is information asymmetry between a creditor and a borrower, the rich borrower may get the loan even when the project is less efficient than that of a borrower without collateral. Besides, in a federal structure such as India's, Centre-state grants are driven more by political compulsions than by efficiency considerations.

In her latest budget, the FM missed the opportunity to raise taxes on the rich. Higher revenues would have enabled health and education reforms towards a more prosperous India, more aware and more antipathetic to corruption.

Kaicker is assistant professor, Ambedkar University, Delhi. Kulkarni is associate professor, Arkansas State University, US, and Gaiha is research affiliate, Population Aging Research Centre, University of Pennsylvania, US

# When Temptation Turns Into Con



Kiran Somvanshi

India's consumption economy needs the instant gratification driver as its legs to grow. We have instant loans available in a few clicks, quick commerce ensuring delivery within minutes, derivatives trading with the lure of fast money, online games promising instant wins, and home delivery of almost anything, including liquor in some states and to be available in others soon. Speedy wish fulfillment has emerged as a viable business model.

A spate of new-age companies is catering to the desire fulfillment of young consumers. Products are marketed to make them appealing. In their 2013 book, Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products, Nir Eyal with Ryan Hoover provide insight into how products are designed to create instant gratification, and psychological effects on users, particularly the young.

Consumption is no longer only about its own sake any more. It's also to build perception and boost image. Thanks to social media, ostentatious consumption — at times beyond the means of the average consumer — is conspicuous, visible and widely

publicised. In his 2017 book, Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked, Adam Alter highlights how technology and social media are designed to be addictive, leading to instant gratification. He also points to its negative impact, especially on younger generations.

Incidentally, the youth who don't have enough money to qualify to be consumers aren't necessarily a constraint for companies. 'Buy now and pay later' arrangements have been made feasible. The flip side to this kind of credit-fueled consumption is the running up of debt, or inability to repay loans. This has become one of the worst-kept secrets of the gratification economy.

Given a free-market scenario, most regulators can hardly do anything except warn. For instance, Sebi chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch recently warned of young people losing money while



Not just hardselling any apple product

trading in F&O. The Economic Survey 2024 says, 'Social media, screen time, sedentary habits, and unhealthy food are a lethal mix that can undermine public health and productivity and diminish India's economic potential.' The private sector's contribution to this toxic mix of habits is substantial, and that is myopic.'

Some measures have been taken to regulate this:

**Ban on dark patterns** In 2023, Central Consumer Protection Authority banned e-commerce and online platforms from using dark patterns. These deceptive practices manipulate customers into buying products they don't intend to, or lure them into buying a more expensive alternative to what they want to buy.

**Hike in STT rates** To control speculative interest in F&O trading, the budget increased the securities transaction tax (STT) rate on futures and options to 0.02% and 0.1%, respectively. Nevertheless, it's largely the 'buyer beware' principle at play. But it's difficult for buyers to be wary if they are young, inexperienced, have easy access to money and live in a hyper-connected world of social media that only amplifies peer pressure. It takes conscious effort and training in

mindfulness, understanding of personal finance and consumer behaviour; parental guidance and positive reinforcement from the ecosystem to dodge the negative effects of instant gratification. Not all young people are necessarily able to overcome or confront their Fomo and course-correct themselves.

One may argue that the state cannot be over-protective of its young citizenry. But it's increasingly difficult for the young to decipher risks. For instance, many online 'likes' for a product are perceived to be a sign of its popularity. Is there a way for young consumers to know if the 'likes' or positive reviews are part of the company's promotion strategy? Our young consumers should know.

Does this absolve companies? Not really. Principles of business sustainability and responsible marketing demand that companies making products and services targeted at the youth be conscious of the long-term ramifications of their actions. It is possible to create products and services that add value to young consumers without exploiting their desire for instant gratification.

It may not be as remunerative in the short term, but would create sustainable value over the longer term. The young are the golden goose of India's consumption economy. Let growth avarice not destroy this golden goose.

kiran.somvanshi@timesofindia.com

# Chat Room

# Let's Clean Up the Western Ghetto

Apropos the Edit, 'Wayanad, How Much Do We Really Care?' (Aug.2), as usual, the heavy toll in terms of fatalities, livelihood and property will eventually remain confined to the affected families and slide into oblivion. The remaining rubble and mud will be figuratively slung around by rival politicians in a bid to establish bivalence and score political brownie points. The century-old Mullaperiyar Dam in Idukki district, being in an earthquake-prone zone, is another disaster waiting to happen. Wayanad is an eye opener to the imperative of evicting people from fragile ecological zones, including the surrounding belt of Mullaperiyar; and rehabilitating them in safer locations by remuneratively engaging them in labour-intensive activities. All 6 Western Ghat states should pool resources to set up methanol plants at scale, aimed at generating employment, economic benefits and environmental conservation.

GRJAGOPALAN NAIR Kochi

## Deadly deluge

Little or no lessons learnt from natural disasters

**F**loods, landslides and cloudbursts have become more frequent and menacing with every monsoon. In the wee hours of July 30, a wall of mud, water and debris hurtled down the hills of Mundakkai and Chooralmala in Wayanad district, killing about 300 people. The landslides occurred due to an extraordinary 'cloudburst' of rainfall; the Wayanad region received over 40 cm of rain between the morning of July 29 and 30.



This saturated the soil in a region whose topography, according to the landslide mapping atlas prepared by the Indian Space Research Organisation last year, is landslide-prone. Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh are reeling under a similar onslaught. The disasters are, however, natural and man-made in equal measure. A combination of climate-induced weather events and environmentally disruptive activities has contributed to such disasters. Cloudbursts have become frequent on account of global warming, with warmer oceans and water bodies adding to atmospheric moisture and creating large masses of clouds that 'burst' over hilly regions, in particular. These very regions, as the ISRO atlas shows, are prone to landslides owing to natural and man-made reasons. Of the top 30 such districts (in a mapping of 147 districts across 17 States), 10 are in Kerala alone, with Wayanad ranked at 13. Six of these are in Uttarakhand, while Himachal Pradesh and Sikkim are vulnerable. With such knowledge as well as advance weather warning systems, emergency as well as long-term steps to protect lives and property can easily be taken.

This is where governments and politicians have let the country down. For instance, population as well as economic activities in vulnerable areas, be it construction, quarrying, tourism and monocropping, should be kept to a minimum. Yet, governments have promoted the opposite, including tourism. There is no time to lose in taking corrective steps. Our knowledge of fragile zones once again brings into focus the Madhav Gadgil committee report (2011) on the Western Ghats. The report had suggested that 64 per cent of the 1.6 lakh sq km Western Ghats region be treated as ecologically sensitive, with few or zero activities. No State has accepted this or even the subsequent Kasturirangan panel report, which brought down the protected zone to 37 per cent.

Politicians of all hues have promoted resorts, homestays and construction. If zoning laws cannot be enforced other steps should be considered. These include limiting the number of tourist footfalls by issuing permits. Hotels and resorts could pay a higher GST in eco-sensitive zones. Above all, environmental concerns do not occupy the policy centrestage. Devastating floods and landslides, especially in the hilly regions, have become regular episodes every monsoon season. Yet, no lessons are learnt. There is an outcry when disaster strikes, and soon things return to the normal, bad ways. Until the next such episode.

## FROM THE VIEWROOM.

### No disaster tourism, please

Anjana PV

**T**he devastating landslides in Kerala's Wayanad district have claimed over 300 lives so far. Natural disasters have become an unfortunate part of our lives. From floods to landslides, such events have been occurring frequently in our country in recent years.

Alongside these calamities, a new trend has emerged — 'disaster tourism'. This refers to people visiting disaster-affected regions to witness and understand the events without necessarily intending to help or rescue.

Following the tragedy in Wayanad, the police issued a request urging people to avoid 'disaster tourism' and unnecessary travel to the area. During times of crisis, people in our country are known for coming together to help one another but unnecessary travel can create significant hurdles, especially in disaster zones. In an era where vlogging (creating and sharing

video content) and social media exhibitionism are the norm, promoting tourism during such dangerous times can lead to more complications.

Disaster tourism, a subset of dark tourism, involves visiting sites associated with tragedy, death, and human suffering. This practice can be viewed as "disaster voyeurism", potentially disrespecting victims and their families by trivialising or commodifying their suffering for entertainment.

However, disaster tourism also has educational and commemorative purposes, allowing people to learn about and remember significant events. While it can provide valuable insights and foster understanding, it is crucial to approach disaster tourism with sensitivity and respect to avoid further harm to affected communities.

While disaster tourism has potential benefits, it can become troublesome or dangerous during a crisis. Therefore, we must approach it with caution.

## CAPITAL IDEAS.



RICHA MISHRA

**A** subject that has found consistent mention in Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's successive Budget speeches is: energy security and energy transition. In her latest Budget speech too, while listing out the nine priorities for generating ample opportunities for all, energy has prominently featured in the journey towards 'Viksit Bharat'.

"In the Interim Budget, I had announced our strategy to sustain high and more resource-efficient economic growth, along with energy security in terms of availability, accessibility and affordability. We will bring out a policy document on appropriate energy transition pathways that balances the imperatives of employment, growth and environmental sustainability," she said in her speech.

This is not the first time that a policy document for energy transition pathway has been spoken about. So, how is it different now?

According to decision-makers, this will work as an umbrella policy, as currently segment-specific reports or policy statements have come out. For example, the one for the Petroleum and Natural Gas Ministry talks about companies in fossil fuel business and their green transition.

"Now that it has been spoken about in the Budget speech, the nuances and the terms of reference will be worked out for the Committee that will work on the policy," a senior official said.

**THRUST ON NUCLEAR ENERGY** Sitharaman, in her speech, also spoke about PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana, a policy for promoting pumped storage projects, and small and modular nuclear reactors as nuclear energy is expected to form a significant part of the energy mix for Viksit Bharat. Her speech also mentioned advanced ultra super critical thermal power plants.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi also, when addressing India Inc at a recent CII event on the Budget, referred to the work being done on small nuclear reactors. He said it will not only benefit industry in the form of energy access but also the entire supply chain related to the sector, which will get new business opportunities.

According to Gauri Jauhar, Executive Director, Energy Transition and Cleantech Consulting, S&P Global Commodity Insights: "It is important for any energy transition pathway to balance the ambition and vision for a new energy system based on lower emissions, with the realities of an existing energy system which, well into this decade and next, will be largely

# For a smooth clean energy shift

Infra and tech support, financial aid, a clear and stable policy, and a robust supply chain are vital



contingent on fossil fuel sources."

Also, any energy transition pathway "should take into account a full life-cycle analysis in order to understand the extent of embedded carbon that comes with the new energy system that is under construction," she added.

When working on policy, what should India look out for? According to Umud Shokri, energy strategist and senior visiting fellow at George Mason University, "Several critical issues need to be addressed to ensure a balanced approach that promotes employment, growth and environmental sustainability. Key areas for consideration include infrastructure development, technology and innovation, economic considerations, policy and regulatory frameworks, environmental sustainability, and securing supply chains."

For infrastructure development, there is a pressing need for robust refuelling and charging infrastructure to support hydrogen and other renewable energy sources, he said, adding, "This includes establishing hydrogen refuelling stations and expanding electric vehicle (EV) charging networks. Enhancing the electricity grid to

**Developing domestic capabilities to produce critical minerals needed for battery production and hydrogen fuel cells will reduce reliance on imports**

accommodate a higher share of renewable energy is essential, and investments in smart grid technologies and energy storage solutions, such as pumped hydro and battery storage, will help manage the intermittent nature of renewable sources."

All these are a part of the segment which the policy should ideally touch upon. The policy should also speak in terms of technology and innovation, continued investment in R&D for hydrogen technologies, energy storage, and renewable energy generation.

"Developing domestic capabilities to produce critical minerals needed for battery production and hydrogen fuel cells will reduce reliance on imports. Encouraging collaboration between the government and private sector through public-private partnerships can accelerate the development of innovative technologies and solutions for energy transition, including engaging private players in nuclear energy projects and advanced renewable technologies," Shokri said.

Besides, he added that the policy should touch upon economic issues, including addressing the high costs associated with hydrogen fuel cell vehicles and renewable technologies.

Financial incentives, subsidies, and tax breaks can help make these technologies more accessible and attractive to businesses and consumers, he said, adding that "transitioning traditional industries to cleaner energy sources requires financial support and incentives, with programmes aimed at decarbonising micro, small, and medium

enterprises (MSMEs) facilitating this transition while ensuring job security."

Establishing a clear and stable policy environment is essential for attracting investment in the energy sector. Revisiting customs duties and tax structures related to renewable energy components can help stimulate domestic manufacturing and reduce costs, he said.

### PRESERVE BIODIVERSITY

It is crucial to ensure that energy transition efforts do not compromise environmental sustainability. Policies should promote not just the adoption of renewable energy but also the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. Securing supply chains involves securing access to essential minerals like lithium, nickel, and cobalt, which are critical for battery production, he pointed out. Developing domestic sources and establishing international partnerships will be key to ensuring a stable supply chain as well as promoting recycling of materials used in renewable technologies. These can help mitigate supply chain risks and reduce environmental impact, Shokri added.

Therefore, the entire energy transition process requires a multifaceted approach that addresses infrastructure, technology, economic factors, policy frameworks, environmental sustainability, and supply chain security. And only then can India effectively balance the imperatives of employment, growth, and environmental sustainability in its pursuit of energy security.

## Trump's ploy against Harris a doubtful starter

By disparaging the Vice-President on her identity, he is hoping to get the support of both Blacks and Indians. It may not work

Sridhar Krishnaswami

**O**n a normal day, it does not take much to have Donald Trump going on a rant on just about anything. But these are not normal times. Stunned by the abrupt withdrawal of Joe Biden from the race and finding that Vice-President Kamala Harris has a unified party behind her with a whopping \$200-odd million in the kitty, the Republican candidate and his campaign seem lost for a strategy other than falling back on a known worn-out path: name calling and personal attacks.

But the flaw lies in a failure to understand that Kamala Harris is not Joe Biden. The Trump campaign has not gleaned back into the pages of the Democratic Presidential primaries of 2020 when the former prosecutor of California did not hesitate to rip Biden for positively referring to Senators who were seen as segregationists. The words "... you are not a racist... but I was that little girl" still should resonate; this was Harris' fiery comeback at Biden in a debate.

The Trump campaign shudders every

time he talks of race, gender or anything at all that would upset the delicate balance nationally or in the battleground states. Even as it is, the six to seven point lead in the battleground states has vanished and nationally Harris has pulled even with the 45th President with some surveys showing that perhaps she is ahead by one or two points.

The extremists in the Grand Old Party played with the "birther" theory when Barack Obama was running for office — that somehow Obama was born outside the US.

### A SWIPE AT HARRIS

And now former President Trump maintains that he was surprised to find out that Kamala Harris is Black. "I didn't know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black and now she wants to be known as Black. So, I don't know, is she Indian or is she Black?" Trump said, addressing the National Association of Black Journalists.

For a person used to insults and name calling from Trump, Harris brushed off the latest swipe as the "same old show"



**BATTLE READY.** Kamala Harris has a unified party behind her

of divisiveness and disrespect. But Harris and others in the political spectrum know the former President's track record in dealing with opponents who are women or belong to the racial minorities. He has not even spared Nikki Haley of the Grand Old Party. But Harris would not have to stay silent. And the gloves could come off very soon, well before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on August 19.

In raking up an identity issue, the former President is hoping to have it

both ways: getting on the right side of Black Americans and the Indian American community, pointing out to the latter that Harris has somehow discarded her South Asian identity. It is unlikely to cut much ice. Republicans may have eaten into the Indian American vote bank over the years, but a solid percentage is still with Democrats and Harris.

Questioning Harris' credentials need not be as damaging as disparaging comments on women *per se*. Here the pick of Vice-Presidential candidate Senator JD Vance of Ohio has rankled even senior Republicans who had urged Trump to look for alternatives. Vance's 2021 comment that America was being run by "childless cat ladies" like Harris invited bipartisan outrage, leaving Trump himself to rush to the rescue.

"Maybe if she (Harris) had five kids with three different men and a scandalous affair with a porn star and was a convicted felon, that would be more palatable to Republican men," comedian Chelsea Handler said.

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

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### Sub-classification of SCs

By holding that States are constitutionally empowered to make sub-classifications within Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to help uplift castes that are more backward among them, the Supreme Court has heralded a potential widening and deepening of the constitutional guarantee of equality. No doubt, the landmark verdict marks a significant milestone in the jurisprudence on affirmative action since it clearly underlines that merit must be understood in terms of the social goods of equality and inclusivity. It should be noted here that historical and empirical evidence points to the fact that Scheduled Castes are not a homogenous category; the caste whose traditional occupation is scavenging will be more backward

than the one whose traditional occupation is weaving, even as both suffer social stigma. It is hoped the verdict would lead to the fine-tuning of affirmative action policies and help State governments address the intense inequality within Scheduled Castes.

**M Jeyaram**  
Sholavandan, TN

### Curbing F&O punts

With reference to the editorial 'Dangerous addiction' (August 2), the consultation paper of SEBI, proposing measures to curb the present excessive speculation activity of inexperienced retail investors in the derivative market, is a meticulous step to de-risk small investors who are vulnerable to heavy losses due to the underlying

volatility in F&O segment of stocks. In their speculative exuberance, investors are likely to get exposed to counter-parties in totally unknown arenas. Though speculative activity in stock markets is not illegal, such precautionary and timely measures are necessary to protect gullible investors.

**Sitaram Popuri**  
Bengaluru

### Rein in speculation

SEBI deserves credit for proposing measures to restrict risky derivatives trading among retail investors. Online gaming too is an activity that has similar risks of addiction and financial loss. Indeed, their advertisements even warn viewers. Yet these platforms are gaining momentum on the back of

promotions, including celebrity endorsements. As in the case of alcohol and tobacco products, government could consider restricting advertising of online gaming. Some use the 'game of skill' versus 'game of chance' argument. But why bet with money?

**V Vijaykumar**  
Pune

### Lessons from Asian giants

Apropos the article 'Growth lessons for India from Asian giants' (August 2), the extraordinary growth of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, powered by early reforms and vibrant manufacturing sector, has transformed those countries into economic powerhouses. While early emphasis on technological innovation and R&D have also played

a major role, skill development and encouragement of micro, small and medium enterprises were instrumental in transforming the manufacturing sector in those countries into intense production hubs. India has been a late starter both in reforms and on focusing on innovation, R&D and on skill development, though the country has not missed the IT and communication technology revolution and has become a major player in the field. However, service sector alone cannot propel the country into the needed high growth trajectory for becoming a developed country. Making the nation a manufacturing hub is essential to achieve the goal.

**Kosaraju Chandramouli**  
Hyderabad



## Weakest first

Allowing sub-quotas to least advanced among SCs deepens social justice

The jurisprudence of affirmative action has been evolving constantly. From a notion of formal equality rooted in a general principle of non-discrimination, it has reached a point where the aim is substantive equality. Reservation is no more seen as an exception to the equality norm, but as a deepening of the idea of equality by embracing diversity and accommodation of those suffering from historical and social disabilities. The latest Supreme Court judgment allowing States to classify Scheduled Castes (SC) into groups and give preferential treatment to the weaker and more backward among them is in line with this progression. By a majority of 6:1, the Court has rejected the idea that the SCs constitute a single homogenous class and that sub-classification will violate the equality rule. The verdict dislodges a 2005 Constitution Bench judgment (*E.V. Chinnaiah vs AP*) that had struck down an Andhra Pradesh law classifying SC communities into groups as unconstitutional. The Court had then ruled that once the President notifies the list of SCs under Article 341, Parliament alone could modify it by law, and that States were barred from “tinkering” with the list. This judgment was cited by the Punjab and Haryana High Court while quashing a preferential sub-quota for Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs within the SC quota. When the matter came to the apex court, a Bench doubted the correctness of *E.V. Chinnaiah* and referred the question to a larger Bench.

The majority verdict is based on a clear recognition that SCs do not constitute a homogeneous class. Under the Presidential List, they have a common constitutional status, but it does not mean that there are no differences in the extent of backwardness among them. A history of untouchability is indeed a common feature among them, but there is historical and empirical evidence that the level of advancement is not uniform. States are empowered to further identify the weaker sections among SCs and extend beneficial treatment. Four judges have taken the view that excluding the “creamy layer” among the SCs from reservation benefits is necessary to give full effect to the principle that the weakest should get the benefits of affirmative action and not be elbowed out by those more advanced than them. Applying the ‘creamy layer’ concept, hitherto confined to OBCs may not be easy. Justice B.R. Gavai, who writes in support of the exclusion of the better-off among the SCs, also notes that the creamy layer norms cannot be the same as those prescribed for the OBCs. The exclusion of the more advanced sections among Dalits was not an issue before the Bench, and the opinions may be non-binding as of now. While excluding the creamy layer may happen some day, the focus should be on the marginalised among Dalits getting adequate representation.

## Stealing the vote

Maduro seems to have resorted to irregularities to hold on to power

In Nicolás Maduro’s watch, Venezuela’s economy contracted 80% in less than a decade. Some 7.8 million Venezuelans fled from the economic hardships. If extreme poverty was at 11% in 2013, the year Hugo Chávez died and Mr. Maduro ascended to presidency, it now stands at 53%, while household poverty is much higher, at 82%, as per the UN. The oil-rich country had witnessed anti-government protests in recent years which were met with crackdowns. Before the July 28 presidential election, opinion polls showed that Edmundo González, the main opposition candidate, had a 20-point lead over the President. But none of these seemed to have mattered in the election, according to official results. Mr. Maduro won 51% of the vote, while Mr. Gonzalez secured 44%, said Venezuela’s election authority. Mr. Maduro can now extend his rule for six more years. But the opposition has reported widespread irregularities in the counting, and accused the President and his allies in state institutions of stealing the vote. According to the opposition, its vote tallies show that Mr. González won some 7.1 million votes against Mr. Maduro’s 3.2 million. Anti-Maduro protests broke out after the official results were announced. And the government is yet to release detailed voter data.

Mr. Maduro is not singularly responsible for the economic crisis. Chavez, a former tank commander who rose to power through elections, defied the liberal economic orthodoxy and built a new welfare state that was funded by oil revenues. By the time Mr. Maduro, who lacked his predecessor’s charisma, came to power, falling oil prices had dealt a blow to Venezuela’s economy. The sanctions by the Trump administration on the oil industry, pushed the economy to the brink of collapse. Mr. Maduro’s response was to tighten his grip on power. His regime seemed helpless when Venezuela was gripped by hyperinflation and scarcity of essential goods and medicines. In the run-up to the elections, the government had promised a free and fair vote. But even before the campaign started, María Corina Machado, the opposition’s most popular candidate, was banned from contesting. Mr. Maduro has rejected the opposition’s claims of fraud after the vote, but he is also under pressure. The U.S. on Thursday recognised Mr. González as the winner and called for a peaceful transition. Even Mr. Maduro’s leftist allies in Latin America, including Colombia and Brazil, have called for full and transparent voting data. Mr. Maduro now has the support of the military. But the deepening divisions at home and isolation abroad would continue to pose questions of legitimacy to his presidency.

# The five guidelines to a Dragon-Elephant tango

I arrived in New Delhi, on May 10, as the 17th Chinese Ambassador to India, and presented the letter of credence to the President of India, Droupadi Murmu, on May 31. Over the past three months, I have met many Indian friends from all walks of life and visited two other States. I am glad to see that this land, which has nurtured a splendid ancient civilization, is brimming with new vitality. I am also deeply impressed by the broad public support for China-India friendship, and the confidence and the expectations for bilateral relations.

### Five guidelines of ‘Mutuals’

China and India are close neighbours. We learned from each other in ancient times, shared weal and woe in modern times, and have a common cause of rejuvenation today. China-India relations have become one of the most important bilateral relations. President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi attach great importance to China-India relations, and have reached an important consensus that China and India are not rivals or threats to each other, but are partners in cooperation and development opportunities. This provides a clear direction for the development of bilateral relations. We need to figure out how to implement it. Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with India’s External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar twice recently, and stressed that China and India should adhere to mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust, mutual accommodation and mutual accomplishment. The “Five Mutuals” provide a significant path for us to implement the above consensus. They should also be the guiding principles for the two big neighbours to get along well. Against the backdrop of profound changes unseen in a century, I believe that the “Five Mutuals” are conducive to bring China-India relations back to a stable and sound track.

Mutual respect is the prerequisite for the development of China-India relations. As an Indian proverb goes, “*jaisa des waisa bhes*” (which roughly means ‘adapt the environment in which you are living’). Not long ago, I visited Maharashtra, attended a traditional Indian wedding, wore local folk costumes and tasted *masala* tea. I realise that as two ancient civilisations, both China and India have their own uniqueness in terms of dietary habits, lifestyles, cultural traditions and development paths. However, these differences did not impede us from attracting and inspiring each other in history. In the new era, it is of even greater significance for us to view each other with an open mind, respect each other’s development path, social system and role on the world stage, and jointly promote development and prosperity



Xu Feihong

the 17th Chinese Ambassador to India

of the two countries, the region and the world.

Mutual understanding is the basis of the development of China-India relations. The two peoples empathised with and supported each other in their respective struggles for national independence and liberation. China understands India’s aspiration for national rejuvenation, and supports India’s foreign policy of strategic autonomy. We are both among the largest developing countries. No country understands better than China what a great cause it is to enable more than 1.4 billion Indians to live a good life, and how much effort it requires. Meanwhile, when I interacted with the Indian people, I found that the exchanges and understanding between us are not enough. We need to further promote dialogue and communication at all levels in various fields, encourage the two peoples to have more exchanges, and promote mutual understanding and political trust, so as to consolidate the political and public foundation for the development of bilateral relations.

Mutual trust is the key to the development of China-India relations. The international situation is more volatile and uncertain than before. More and more people have realised that as being among the largest developing countries, China and India should avoid mutual suspicion and attrition in order to rise together. We need to view bilateral relations from a strategic perspective, form the right perception of each other, view each other’s strategic intentions objectively, and stick to the right vision – that China and India are partners and development opportunities to each other instead of being rivals or threats. We could work together for peaceful coexistence and insist on resolving disputes in a peaceful manner. With political trust, not even the Himalayas can stop us from strengthening friendly exchanges. Without it, not even level land can bring us together. The Chinese people are willing to be good friends and partners of the Indian people forever, living in harmony and pursuing common development.

### An ‘all-round relationship’

Mutual accommodation is the guarantee of the development of China-India relations. China and India are neighbours who cannot be moved away. It is natural for us to have differences and frictions. The key is to form a correct perception of differences and handle them in a proper manner. As we both inherit the political wisdom of ancient oriental civilisations, it is believed that we can find effective ways to mutually accommodate each other’s core interests and major concerns, properly handle differences through dialogue, and reach a mutually acceptable solution. Meanwhile, our relationship is all-round and cannot be defined by certain

The formulation of ‘five mutuals’ can help bring China-India relations back to a stable and sound track

# An unstated shift in Modi’s economic direction

“We are nudging industry to use less automation and more labour,” said Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan in a post-Budget interview. He was referring to the Narendra Modi government’s Budget announcement of a new employment linked incentive (ELI) scheme for corporates. Under the scheme, companies will be provided a financial incentive for every new employee they hire. Dozens of commentators and experts have critiqued it and have questioned the assumption that a company will hire more people, merely for a financial incentive. This is a myopic and technocratic analysis that misses a fundamental shift in economic thought. The Finance Secretary’s statement symbolises a significant and profound change in the economic policy direction of the Modi government. It signals a recognition of the misplaced faith in chasing GDP growth, the big capital-labour skew, and the need for course correction.

### Initiatives that did not work well

For a decade, the Modi government’s economic philosophy was the traditional Washington Consensus’ trickle-down development model that emphasised the efficient production of goods and services, in the assumption that it would automatically lead to jobs, incomes and prosperity for people. When companies produce, GDP grows, and jobs are created, was the doctrine. ‘Make in India’, which was launched in 2014, was this quintessential example that aimed to spur manufacturing in the hope that it would make companies hire large numbers of workers. In 2019, the Modi government made a sudden off-Budget announcement of a big cut in corporate tax rates for companies, again in the hope that it would lure industry to invest more, which would then trickle down to more jobs. In 2020, the government announced a new production linked incentive (PLI) scheme of a whopping ₹2 lakh crore as financial incentives to be provided to companies based on the achieving of certain production targets. Once again, the intent was to incentivise companies financially to produce more, which would then lead to more



Praveen Chakravarty

Chairman, All India Professionals’ Congress

jobs. Of course, we know now that none of these initiatives yielded the expected number of jobs. Companies either pocketed the tax cuts without investing or they invested more in equipment than in hiring people. Simply put, production incentives or tax cuts for corporates neither trickled nor dripped down to enough people through jobs and incomes.

ELI is a recognition of this failure and a change in course to provide direct incentives to corporates to employ people rather than through indirect trickle-down means. After all, if one agrees that production incentives can entice companies to produce more by lowering marginal production costs, then, by the same logic, employment incentives should propel companies to hire more people by lowering marginal labour costs. ELI must be viewed in the context of PLI and not as a standalone idea for job creation. PLI is an incentive for the economy to pour more into the top of a funnel. ELI is an incentive to collect more at the bottom of the funnel, which is the eventual objective anyway.

ELI is the first such policy of the Modi government that acknowledges the breakdown between GDP growth and jobs. If the ultimate goal of economic development is to improve the living standards of the median citizen, then the neo-liberal economic development paradigm of chasing GDP growth has run its course because it has stopped translating into jobs and prosperity for people. Which is why the bombastic rhetoric about India being the fastest growing economy in the world has no significance for the average Indian. The natural next step then is to call for direct policy interventions for jobs for people, rather than for economic output. And a PLI to ELI transition is the first attempt in this shift in economic direction.

### It can make a difference

ELI by itself may not incentivise corporates to create more jobs. But it can impact firm level decisions at the margin, of buying equipment versus hiring more people. Ceteris paribus, an ELI scheme encourages firms to hire people rather than use machines. When a million small, medium and large enterprises are ‘ELI nudged’ to

differences, and our cooperation cannot be disrupted by a single incident.

Mutual accomplishment is the direction of the development of China-India relations. As important emerging economies, China and India are both at a critical stage of national development and revitalisation, and enjoy broad common interests and the space for cooperation. The third plenary session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, which concluded recently, launched a new journey of comprehensively deepening reform. China is advancing Chinese modernisation on all fronts, which will provide new opportunities to the world. India also has the vision of “Viksit Bharat 2047”. China hopes to develop itself well and wishes India the same. We are glad to see India make new achievements in national development and play a constructive role in international and regional affairs. We would like to work with India to help each other succeed, achieve common development and revitalisation, promote the unity and cooperation of the Global South, and join hands to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

### From the principles of peaceful coexistence

The “Five Mutuals” carry forward and further develop the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and echo the “mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interests” proposed by the Indian leader. They are also a useful guide for both sides to implement the important consensus reached by the two leaders. I believe that they will be understood and recognised by the Indian side. It is normal to have ups and downs in China-India relations. I believe that as two great ancient civilisations, both sides can look beyond the horizon and steer bilateral relations in the right direction, and jointly usher in a new future. In June 2024, I attended the inauguration of the new campus of Nalanda University in Bihar, and visited its ancient ruins where Monk Xuanzang studied nearly 1,400 years ago. I deeply recognise that we had close historical and cultural ties. In the 21st century, there is no reason why we cannot develop bilateral relations well.

President Xi Jinping stated that if China and India speak with one voice, the whole world will listen. Prime Minister Modi said India and China are “two bodies with one spirit”. A “Dragon-Elephant Tango” is the only correct choice for the two sides.

I firmly believe that under the strategic guidance of the two leaders, both sides have enough wisdom and the capability to handle bilateral relations well and forge a right path for the neighbouring countries to coexist in harmony and develop hand in hand.

choose labour over machines (capital), it can make a meaningful difference to overall job creation.

Neo-liberal economists, for whom technology-led productivity and efficiency are the cornerstones of economic development, would deem ELI blasphemous. Their argument is that it would render Indian companies less productive and, hence, less competitive globally. They are partially justified in their fears but the current model of development that prizes capital over labour and headline GDP over jobs is unsustainable in a democratic society.

### Jobs deficit and ideas deficit

The shortage of jobs is the root cause of dangerous and foolhardy proposals such as the recent one in Karnataka to reserve all jobs for locals. When there are very few jobs generated overall in the economy, political compulsions in a democracy are bound to induce a mad rush to grab as many of the few available jobs for their voters. It is intellectually dishonest to merely criticise such proposals but not provide concrete ideas to create new jobs. India not only has a jobs deficit but also an ideas deficit to bridge the jobs deficit. The stock response by economists for creating more jobs is the much abused “R” word – reforms. Their standard refrain is that a concoction of labour, education, skills and ease of doing business reforms is the magic pill to create more jobs, which is easier written than done.

ELI may or may not work to create additional jobs, but it is certainly a concrete new idea to alleviate the capital-labour imbalance and jobless growth woes of India’s economy. More importantly, it marks a distinct shift in policy direction from trickle-down economics to bottom-up interventions. “India is ready for ELI, regardless of whose idea it is” was the last line in my article in a daily on the morning of Budget 2024. Just a few hours later, much to my utter surprise, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the ELI scheme in Parliament. ELI was proposed in the Congress’s manifesto, and it is extremely laudable that the Finance Minister chose to keep politics aside to adopt this idea in the larger national interest.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Endless quotas?

After the top court’s verdict, it will be a case of sub-classifications and more quotas (Page 1, August 2). It could become a mammoth task to settle for these from an objective and political angle. Our political leaders could also begin to

manipulate quotas to suit their political needs. **Gopalaswamy J.,** Chennai

States must act with care and the identification of groups should be based on unchallengeable evidence and reason. The

categorisation should not be made or perceived to be made on political reasons.

**Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao,** Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

### Rail coaches

The Railway Minister appears to be content with the ratio of 2:1 between

non-air-conditioned and air-conditioned coaches on trains (“Railways will soon add 2,500 general coaches, says Minister”, August 2).

Previously, the ratio was around 4:1. This has resulted in a significant shortage of seats in the lower classes, as seen by

### Corrections & Clarifications

Ms. Preeti Sudan is the fourth woman to head the UPSC, and not second as mentioned in a report, “Preeti Sudan appointed Chairperson of UPSC” (August 1, 2024).

multiple ground reports of passengers crammed like sardines in the general and sleeper coaches. He could have clarified whether the share of air-conditioned coaches would increase after the new arrivals.

**Kamal Laddha,** Bengaluru

# GROUND ZERO



**Sombre recovery** A body being transported across the river using a rope and pulley by rescue personnel at the landslide hit Chooralmala. THULASI KAKKAT



The bridge is going to make a big difference in the search operation.... It will speed up the rescue and search operation

**MAJ. GEN. V.T. MATHEW**  
GOC, Kerala and Karnataka sub-area

Search teams too had harrowing experiences to report. "When our men entered a mud-covered abandoned house, they were anguished to see the bodies of three children huddling on a sofa under the concrete rubble. Similarly, they found the body of a man lying peacefully on a cot in another house," said a Fire and Rescue Services senior official.

When it rained during the search, people on the site raised worries about a fresh landslide. Toys, books, spectacles, children's clothes, utensils, medicines, framed marriage photos were found in damaged homes. Gas cylinders were seen under the rubble of some houses. "We expect bodies to be trapped under the debris, whether it is concrete or logs," says Sajeer Madasery, a volunteer.

Most bodies retrieved by the search teams were disfigured and mutilated. Identifying them remains a hard task at the Community Health Centre, Meppadi. Forensic surgeons have been brought in from different government medical colleges for postmortems. "We are making sure that postmortem procedures are done as fast as we can to help relatives identify and claim the bodies," says Dr. Reena K.J., Director of Health Services, Kerala.

The identification of mangled bodies is another traumatising experience for the survivors. "There is nothing more painful," says Basheer Saadi, Wayanad district president of the Shanwanam help group that is volunteering here.

Mass graves have been dug at the graveyards of Meppadi Juma masjid, Nellimunda Juma masjid, and St. Sebastian Church at Chooralmala. Mass pyres have been prepared at Meppadi public crematorium. Many funerals were over with none shedding tears, because traumatised survivors and their relatives have been numbed by the tragedy. "The trauma is so deep; it will take a long time for them to recover. We are prioritising counselling for them," says Dr. Reena.

The State and Central governments responded to the disaster by mobilising forces for rescue and search. The State has posted four ministers at Meppadi to supervise the rescue and rehabilitation. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan says, "Counselling and privacy are very important for the survivors now." The Education Department will soon send teachers to the relief camps to teach the children lodged there.

Forest and Wildlife Minister A.K. Saseendran says the government will work on rehabilitation after completing the search operations. "It's going to be a top priority for us. We will use all our experience for it," he says.

## Times of trouble

While the Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced ₹2 lakh for the next of kin of the deceased and ₹50,000 for the injured, the tragedy opened up a debate between the Centre and the State. Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that the Centre had warned Kerala of heavy rains and landslides on July 23, 24, and 25.

Kerala Chief Minister, even when calling for joint measures to parry natural disasters caused by climate change and extreme weather conditions, refuted Shah's claims. He said that neither the India Meteorological Department (IMD), nor the Geological Survey of India (GSI), nor the Central Water Commission had issued a red alert for Wayanad ahead of the July 30 landslides. IMD issued a red alert for Kerala in the early morning of July 30, a few hours after the State witnessed its worst landslide.

The GSI had however, categorised the Vellarimala region of Wayanad as a highly vulnerable zone after the 2019 Puthumala landslide that took place just a few kilometres downhill from Mundakkai. In an atlas of landslide-prone areas made by ISRO, Wayanad is said to be the most vulnerable in Kerala and is in the 13th position among the country's 147 landslide-susceptible districts.

In 2011 the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, headed by ecologist-author Madhav Gadgil, had categorised the area into three ecologically sensitive zones, with the now impacted Vythiri taluk being one of the most sensitive. In an interview with *The Hindu* after the disaster, he had said, "No development should have taken place in these highly sensitive areas." There are resorts, artificial lakes, and other commercial construction in the area.

Experts say the continuous rain the region witnessed over the last two weeks had softened the soil, triggering the landslides. But they differ on how it happened. According to former GSI deputy director general C. Muraleedharan, heavy rain caused the supersaturated soil to blast like a dam, leading to a debris flow.

According to C.P. Rajendran, professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, deforestation and unplanned buildings too were responsible. A study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* in 2022 found that 85% of Wayanad was under forest cover until the 1950s and 62% disappeared between 1950 and 2018, whereas area under plantations went up by 1800.75%. However, Kerala Forest Statistics 2020 records show that forest cover in Wayanad stands at 74.18%, and is the highest in the State.

"The frequency of landslides has gone up in Wayanad," says Rajendran, suggesting long-term strategies. Imaginative and humane initiatives are the need of the hour for Kerala, which has a high-density population, he says, adding that landslide risk mapping is a must, using all available resources, including satellite images.

Meanwhile, rainfall continues in Wayanad.

# Death rains on Wayanad

Over 200 people died, two settlements were wiped out, and one severely impacted, after heavy rains caused a landslide in north-east Kerala's hilly district. **Abdul Latheef Naha** finds a land battered beyond recognition, with about 500 injured and many still missing. Even as support from across India pours in, questions are raised about why this happened

*Trigger warning: The following article has disturbing details.*

In the early, dark hours of July 30, Nature staged a macabre dance on two sleepy villages in the lap of the Vellarimala hill range in the Western Ghats. In a few minutes, roughly 200 households in the biggest ever landslide in Kerala's history, were wiped out.

When the sun rose in the morning, Mundakkai and Chooralmala, twin settlements in Wayanad's Vellarimala village in Meppadi panchayat had vanished, transforming a landscape of rolling hills into a horrifying trail of havoc. Two landslides, at about 1 a.m. and 4:10 a.m. have killed over 200 people so far and injured about 500. The number of people missing is nearly 300.

The Indian Space Research Organisation's National Remote Sensing Centre would later release satellite images showing that 86,000 square metres of land had simply slipped out of place. The swift flowing debris, from crown to run-out zone, lasted 8 kilometres. The crown zone was "a reactivation of an older landslide," it observed. The landslide plunged into the Iruvazhinjipuzha, one of the tributaries of the Chaliyar river, swollen with the rain. Both raged and burst their banks. The combination of cascading heavy mud and gushing water took its toll.

Now, families count missing loved ones. Every family has losses, some more than others. "I lost my sister Afeeda, her husband Sattar, and their children Filu, Adi, and Sanu at Mundakkai. Twenty-five members of Sattar's family have disappeared," says Sakeer K., a construction worker who had asked his sister to come to his house at Nellimunda, a couple of kilometres away, far from the river. "I feared for them as it was raining unusually heavily that night."

Jitika Prem, a dance teacher from Mundakkai, shudders at the thought of her missing students. She attempts to describe how she and her family ran out of their house to safety when giant rocks and logs flattened their home. She lost her cousins Sivan, Jijina, and Pramodini, who were found in a huddle, in death. Many gathered in a resort near Mundakkai to shelter.

The last time Kerala witnessed devastation like this was during the floods of 2018 that claimed 433 lives and affected over 5.4 million people. The Puthumala tragedy of August 2019 left 17 dead and flattened 58 houses.

Rescue and relief was quick, with over 1,800 personnel coming in, from the Indian Army, Navy, and Airforce; Indian Coast Guard Disaster Relief Team; and the National and State level Disaster Response Forces. State forces from the police, forest, excise, and motor vehicle departments are providing logistical support.

## Forewarned but unarmed

The first landslide took place at around 1 a.m. The thunderous sound of the floodwaters woke people up, but many could not get out of their



I lost my sister Afeeda, her husband Sattar, and their children.... Twenty-five members of Sattar's family have disappeared

**SAKEER K.**  
Construction worker

houses in time. Local WhatsApp groups were soon flooded with screams for help. The cry of a woman named Minnath went viral as it was forwarded from group to group. "Many people are stuck in their homes. Please come; help us. The house behind Basheerka's shop is gone. I don't know what happened to my husband." Her cries were heard, and she was saved by local people.

Onapparambil Moidu hung on to a ceiling fan after standing on a cot along with his daughter and her eight-month-old child. The swirling water and mud reached his neck. At that point, he says he made the most decisive move of his life, to get through a half open door. "I stared death in the face. The bypass surgery I recently underwent has weakened me. I mustered all my energy; my daughter hung on to my back, and I held my grandchild over my head. We pushed ourselves through the mud for about 250 metres," recounts Moidu, at a relief camp at Government Higher Secondary School, Meppadi town, about 15 km from the disaster zone. His feet were banded for injuries he suffered during the escape. Two camps in Meppadi of the 82 camps across Wayanad are catering to survivors. They are established in a government and a private school.

Moidu's was a two-storey concrete house, about 50 metres from the Iruvazhinji that flowed through Chooralmala. Nothing of it remains now. "I lost my wife's mother, her sister, her husband, and their children in Mundakkai. Several of my family and friends have disappeared," he says. Then adds, "If the first landslide was a test dose, then the second was nature's prescription."

## Deadly deluge

When he heard the news of the first landslide, Wayanad District Panchayat president Samshad Marakkar reached Chooralmala at 2 a.m. along with his friends. "The second landslide came after 4 a.m. unleashing the sound of a dinosaur in a

DTS theatre. It was so huge that it wiped out everything in its path. I retrieved the first body of a man that morning, followed by that of a girl, and took them to hospital," he says.

The landslide took away people in their sleep and brought their mangled bodies to the Chaliyar downstream at Munderi. Many bodies went through the steep waterfalls of Soochippara, Kanthanpara, and Meenmutty before reaching Munderi in Pothukal near Nilambur.

It knocked down a bridge connecting Chooralmala with Mundakkai and Attamala, the Shiva temple of Chooramala, a mosque at Mundakkai, a Government Vocational Higher Secondary School in Vellarimala, and houses and business establishments. A few resorts were destroyed.

"I had several of my friends in Mundakkai and Attamala. They are missing," said Dheera Singh, a tea estate labourer from Madhya Pradesh, as he stands dazed at the site where the Shiva temple had stood. A ficus tree next to the temple site still stands, a witness to what is lost. So does a portion of the large temple auditorium. Temple priest Kumar Swamy's body was recovered and taken to his home State of Tamil Nadu. Mundakkai Masjid Imam Shihab Faizy Qayyoomi's body was retrieved from the Chaliyar at Pothukal. The landslide took away a portion of the masjid in which Qayyoomi was sleeping.

Shailaja K.M., who used to help Kumar Swamy clean the bronze lamps at the Chooralmala temple, says Shiva helped them get out of the chest-deep water. "My children and I gathered in one room as floodwaters began rising. We thought we would die. I sent messages on WhatsApp to my brothers, bidding them farewell," she remembers. They managed to push through the mud to safety. "We climbed to the second floor of our neighbour Azeez's house," says Shailaja.

It was pitch dark as the power lines had snapped. Some with clothes on and some without, ran into the coffee and cardamom plantations nearby to escape. There, they confronted elephants, but remained safe. "We realised that the wild elephant understood our plight. The tusker did nothing to us," whimpers Sujata, who was trapped in front of an elephant in the dark chilly night.

## Trauma and support

Until the Army constructed a Bailey bridge across the Iruvazhinjipuzha, using prefabricated trusses on August 1 evening, the search for bodies in Mundakkai was hard, as rescue teams and machines could not make it across the river. "The bridge will make a big difference in the search operation. We have to search the whole area using earth movers and other heavy equipment. It will speed up the search and rescue operation," says Maj. Gen. V.T. Mathew, general officer commanding (GOC) of Kerala and Karnataka sub-area, in charge of the rescue operations at Mundakkai.



People stranded at Attamala after the landslide, being evacuated via a temporary bridge THULASI KAKKAT



# Prosecutions and politics don't mix



ERIC POSNER

As America's attention turns to November's presidential election between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, the prosecutions of the former president have been all but forgotten. But Democrats hope that Ms Harris's previous role as a district attorney may help jog memories and persuade some

crucial swing voters to ditch the felon for the prosecutor. Will it work? Or has the failed assassination attempt against Mr Trump retroactively mythologised the sputtering prosecutions as Stations of the Cross on the way to his near-martyrdom?

The prosecutions have, so far, failed to hurt Mr Trump's re-election campaign. The prosecution for mishandling confidential documents, filed on June 8, 2023, by Special Counsel Jack Smith, got bogged down as the presiding judge, Aileen Cannon, held hearing after hearing on frequently frivolous motions, before finally dismissing the case on the grounds that Mr Smith's appointment was unconstitutional.

The only successful prosecution so far was New York District Attorney Alvin Bragg's fraud case, which resulted in Mr Trump's conviction for falsifying busi-

ness records, apparently to conceal hush-money payments to an adult-film actress. Ironically, this was the weakest of the four cases, and the least likely to result in jail time or any other serious penalty. Finally, there was also the failed attempt to keep Mr Trump off the ballot based on the Constitution's insurrection clause — an argument that all nine Supreme Court justices rejected. All this has provided Republicans with the potent political argument that Mr Trump's opponents have abused the legal system to harass him because they can't beat him fairly in the upcoming election.

The reality is more complicated, of course. Mr Trump all but begged Smith to bring the confidential documents case by refusing to turn over the documents when requested. The chaos of January 6, 2021, has led to hundreds of legitimate

prosecutions of rioters, and Mr Trump can certainly be held morally responsible for the deaths and injuries on that day, whether or not he actually violated the law. Moreover, Mr Smith was unlucky in his draw of Judge Cannon, who at best can be described as excessively cautious, and at worst out of her depth or possibly even biased in favour of Trump, who appointed her.

It is still possible that Mr Trump could end up in jail. If he loses the election, proceedings in the remaining three cases will lurch forward. But the prosecutions appear to have improved his electoral prospects, and if he defeats Ms Harris, they will surely be terminated or suspended because of the difficulties of prosecuting a sitting president. Much of this could have been (and was) predicted. But there are still some lessons to be

learned. The standard concern about prosecutions of political officials is that they can set off an endless round of retaliatory prosecutions.

This type of tit-for-tat reprisal, which could spread to the states, would further inflame US politics and potentially lead presidents and other government officials to scheme to stay in power rather than take the risk of being prosecuted if they step down voluntarily after losing an election. That would be the end of American democracy. According to this theory, constitutional democracy has survived precisely because the political class has resisted the temptation to launch political prosecutions.

The problem with this view, of course, is that Mr Trump violated the norm against political prosecution long before Democrats got around to it. Back in 2016, he promised to indict Hillary Clinton; and since then — both in and out of office, and before and after his own indictments — he has threatened to order prosecu-

tions of a litany of political opponents and even supporters who he believes have betrayed him. But there is another, better way to look at it all. The cases against Mr Trump merely illustrate that trials of political opponents are exceedingly risky in a democratic country, because the defendants can always turn the tables and accuse the prosecutors of abusing the legal system for their own political reasons.

The silver lining is that if Mr Trump is elected, he probably will not follow through on his threats to order prosecutions of half the Democratic leadership and a good number of Republicans as well. And even if he does, the cases will blow up in his face. If there is any lesson from the Mr Trump trials, it is that political prosecutions in a democratic country are more likely to hurt those in power than their opponents.

The writer is a professor at the University of Chicago Law School. ©Project Syndicate, 2024

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



# Delhi's new political economy



PLAIN POLITICS

ADITI PHADNIS

Delhi's soul has been seared by the death of three young people who drowned in the basement of a coaching centre in Old Rajinder Nagar because drainage systems were not working or did not exist. About a year ago, videos circulated on the social media of a similar facility in Mukherjee Nagar, close to Delhi University. In that case, it was fire: Children could be seen jumping off the top floor of the building to certain death because the building was enveloped in an inferno and there were no fire-escape systems in place. There have been other incidents of house collapse because illegal construction in the neighbourhood has weakened the foundations of existing houses; and carbon monoxide poisoning because of faulty ventilation. Everything points to collusion/corruption/neglect by officials of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and the Delhi government. What should worry everyone is that this will keep happening.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) controls the MCD. It is an established fact that the AAP and its officials,

especially the bureaucracy, do not get on. The physical attack on then chief secretary Anshu Prakash in 2018 by loyalists of the AAP was the subject of a bitterly fought court battle that Mr Prakash only partially won. The section of the bureaucracy that does not agree with the AAP has a ready court of appeal in the lieutenant governor's office. This only strengthens the AAP's case that those who are not with it are against it. Two poles of power do not make for good governance.

In 2022, the AAP wrested control of the MCD from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), ending that party's 15-year term. The AAP got 134 wards but the BJP was not far behind with 104 and only three percentage points in terms of votes. This was after the BJP piloted and successfully changed Delhi's local governance scheme: In 2012, Sheila Dikshit trifurcated local government into zones, hoping to break the BJP's back via a kind of delimitation. The trifurcation had its problems and these were manifested in 2017, when the BJP won by a landslide in the MCD elections with 181 wards of the 270. The AAP has been in power in the Delhi Assembly since 2015 with two massive victories (in 2015 and 2020), but the 2017 polls proved it had shallow roots: It could win only 49 wards. The 2022 polls fixed this. Just prior to the 2022 polls, the BJP re-merged the zones into one entity. But it still lost the elections to the AAP.

Why is all this important? Apart from corruption, negligence, and associated urban-governance problems, politics is central to the MCD's

functioning. A physical fight broke out in the MCD in 2023 over the election of standing committees. The AAP and BJP fought with water bottles and fists. The election of the mayor was equally contentious. You can be forgiven for asking that if they were fighting all the time, when the councillors found time to work. The Delhi High Court has asked the same questions. The L-G's office has also ratcheted up the pressure, charging that the Delhi government was asked to de-silt drains and it just sat on the proposal. The AAP says when it wants to work, the L-G's office won't let it.

You would have thought that all this would lead to the great revival of the BJP in Delhi, which had titans like Madan Lal Khurana leading it at one time. The current chief of the party, Virender Sachdeva, has held press conferences and led a demonstration outside the AAP office. But mobilisation has been limited to protests by BJP workers. The outrage of ordinary, unaffiliated voters remains untapped. BJP insiders acknowledge that the party needs to be helmed by someone who can match Arvind Kejriwal's stature. A Sudhanshu Trivedi or Bansuri Swaraj could bring the freshness the party needs in Delhi.

No city in India is changing as much as Delhi. Migrants continue to be its backbone as before. But the age, regional profile, and background of those coming to Delhi are completely different today from what they were even 10 years ago. The rise of the AAP was the result of Delhi's new political economy. The BJP needs to attune itself to this reality.

# Great coaching scam & abomination

How broken our governance and how incredible our hypocrisy must be that we cannot make profits from educating young Indians, but can earn thousands of crores by giving them tuitions?

Everybody who matters anywhere in our "system" is now trying to do something about the death by drowning of three young people in the basement library of Rau's IAS Study Circle in Old Rajinder Nagar, west Delhi's UPSC coaching hub.

The Delhi High Court has handed over the investigation to the CBI, while the Delhi government has sealed a whole bunch of such basements at multiple other coaching centres and announced that it will pass a law regulating such businesses. Some owners and senior management members have been arrested.

And to cap the absurdity, the Delhi Police has made world headlines by arresting the owner and driver of an SUV that merely happened to drive across the flooded street, apparently, pushing the water into the basement and causing the flood.

Some of the owners of these coaching centres and superstar "teachers" are appearing on selected media platforms, particularly those with which they have had mutually beneficial commercial relationships, to express fake sympathy with the victims but mostly for self-exculpation.

Nobody is particularly focused on the key question: If this is how much you charge, or you earn this much fame on Instagram from the reels you make, how come you're still running "classes" in these unsafe, unhygienic, slum-like conditions?

Or how is it that while they charge their students top dollar on the promise that they can game a system with a failure rate of about 99.8 per cent, they do not spend on providing at least some basic facilities and safety?

This, in our ridiculous system where it isn't legal to make profits from education. You run universities, colleges, schools but pretend you make no profits.

The coaching business has no such issue. Many are either listed on stock markets or headed there. How broken does our governance have to be — and how incredibly revealing our hypocrisy — that you can't make profits from providing young Indians education, but can earn thousands of crores by offering the

same graduates the same tuition?

One way of figuring out how big the coaching business is and how fast it's growing is to just look at the GST the Centre has been collecting from them. In 2019-2020, the GST collected at the rate of 18 per cent was ₹2,240 crore. Five years later, it has already gone up more than 150 per cent to ₹5,517 crore. It is estimated that it'll go up to about ₹15,000 crore by 2029.

The other way to understand the size and power of the business is simply to look at the front pages of your big daily newspapers across the country. These coaching centres have marketing budgets to buy acres and acres of that expensive real estate on newsprint, advertising not just their successful "students" but also their "teachers".

Each is painted as a star. And each one's name is suffixed with "sir". Or in the rare case of a female "teacher" (about one in 50 by my cursory count), "ma'am". I suppose it is an early blooming of our future rulers in the "siring" or "ji-huzoori" culture. It is also the biggest individual brand-building exercise in India outside the movie business, as the superstardom of founders and teachers is essential to the success of a coaching business.

Now, teachers were usually self-effacing, generous and large-hearted people dispensing wisdom and knowledge to pupils with humility. The coaching business is a blot on teaching and its superstar phenomenon represents two things: One, an insult to real, anonymous, modestly paid teachers; and, two, a reminder to us of how broken our regular education system is. If the system wasn't in such shambles, why would literally millions of young people hang around in cities for "coaching"?

Of course, many of those selected will lend their faces to these advertisements, some will be paid for it and thereby begin their hallowed careers with a kind of a "bribe". Check out Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *12th Fail*.

The main reason the coaching business has crossed ₹30,650 crore in size (take GST of ₹5,517 crore at 18 per cent as the base) and is booming is that our public education

system is broken. In so many ways, this is the biggest instance of broken window economics in our governance, alongside our electricity supply issues.

The idea of broken window economics, or fallacy, is credited to a 19th-century French economist and parliamentarian, Frédéric Bastiat. He used an imaginary shopkeeper, James Goodfellow, as an example. You break a window, hire a carpenter to fix it, he buys bread from what you pay him and pays the baker, and so on. Bastiat said this wasn't a virtuous cycle. It is the broken-window fallacy. What is missed here is opportunity cost.

In this case, Mr Goodfellow has his shop and window, and the people in the chain have their jobs. However, he could have used this money to buy his son shoes and himself a book, which would create a truly virtuous cycle.

See how this plays out in our lives. We give subsidies for power, our grids are broken, our utility companies are broke, producers aren't getting paid, and banks that lent them money are struggling. Everybody is broke while the country has a power surplus. Our power is unreliable, goes off too often, and the voltage fluctuates, so we invest in generators, inverters and voltage stabilisers, buy enormous amounts of diesel and burn it to pollute the air.

This worsens our air, which is already polluted because we burn our garbage, the combination of free power and water leads to stubble burning, and so on. The solution is to buy air purifiers for our homes, which cost more than air conditioners. All of these — generators, stabilisers, inverters and air purifiers — exemplify our massive broken-window economics. Education is no different. The coaching business is simply its worst manifestation.

Nobody wants to learn from the Chinese, but see how Xi Jinping addressed it in 2021. He demolished his entire tuition and coaching industry overnight. Reasons given: It was straining the finances of families, causing inequality, wasting families' time and taking young people away from more fun things.

Everything, including coaching centres for China's famed UPSC equivalent, Gaokao, was banned. There was to be no tutoring for profit, no IPO listings, no share sales, limits on online learning, no mergers, acquisitions, foreign collaborations. End of story.

Overnight, Chinese edutech companies lost more than \$1 trillion on the stock markets, way more than the damage in the 2008 global financial meltdown. Jack Ma apart (he was dismantled differently), three of the top billionaires, Larry Chen, Michael Yu and Zhang Bangxin, lost between 50 and 90 per cent of their wealth — all from edtech.

Going as far as Xi Jinping may seem like going too far, but if you list the problems he was addressing, it's the same list in India. So something must be done. This coaching-tuition-profiteering model built on the back of a broken education system is a scandal and an abomination, and must go.

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# Back and forth in time

EYE CULTURE

VANITA KOHLI-KHANDEKAR

The Universal Humanitarian Church (UHC) is a repressive, regressive organisation that isolates its members from their family and friends, and leeches money from them. Chapman Farm in Norfolk, UK, where it indoctrinates its members is a hotbed of abuse and murder; life there could break the strongest of souls. When a client with a son in the clutches of the church seeks help, private detective Robin Ellacott infiltrates the cult. She and her partner Cormoran Strike, eventually bring it down but not before lots of trauma and mayhem.

*The Running Grave*, the seventh and latest book in Robert Galbraith's (aka J.K. Rowling's) Strike series, is, like the six before it, a page-turner. The creator of Harry Potter just knows how to build a world, populate it with characters you love, hate, recognise or empathise with, in a story that keeps you gripped. Not surprisingly, soon after putting down the seventh book, I went back to the first six and read them all over again.

There is something deliciously wonderful about re-reading or re-watching a thriller/mystery/whodunnit. For one, knowing who the murderer is or what the mystery is, totally changes the experience of reading. You see characters and situations in a new light, join the dots differently, and at times find the odd plot glitch. This is true for most (fiction) authors I have re-read — JRR

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Ayn Rand's work spanning everything from *The Fountainhead* to *Atlas Shrugged*, everything that Agatha Christie has written and Keigo Higashino, who is most famous for *The Devotion of Suspect X*. These have been read umpteen times and enjoyed each time. There are other favourites — JD Salinger, Albert Camus, Ian McEwan, Donna Tartt — among many others.

However, to make the point, let us stick to the crime, mystery, thriller kind of genre. If a book grips you as much the second or third time, there is much to be said for the writer. Almost fifty years after she died, Christie still gets a full shelf or a section in bookshops across the world. Her books may seem simple to people who like, say, the more evolved thrillers of the kind Len Deighton wrote. But the stories are unusual. The English village, where many of them are set, is in stark relief to life as we know it now. And her characters, from Ms Marple and Hercule Poirot to Captain Hastings and Ms Lemon, work.

That is true for films too. James Bond (am partial to the Daniel Craig ones), Jason Bourne and *Mission Impossible*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Potter*, the entire Christie series from ITV and BBC, *The Matrix* are stories I can re-watch any number of times, in sequence without forwarding them.

That brings this to the second reason why re-watching and re-reading is such a wonderful experience: Some of the best stories

are also the most prescient. *The Matrix*, a film in which intelligent software has taken over the world, came in 1999. The trilogy was wrapped up in 2003. While machine learning was happening by then, we hadn't reached the levels of cognitive computing or artificial intelligence (AI) that the film was set in. Now with both climate change and AI knocking urgently on our doors — the world of the *Matrix* seems so real.

The latest film in the *Matrix* franchise came in 2021. Obviously, I rewatched the trilogy and the latest film one after the other earlier this year. Its prescience surprised me, again. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), which is set in an interstellar world or Isaac Asimov's Foundation Series, which was first published in 1951, have passed me by. But friends swear by them and those worlds don't seem as unreal as they did 50 years ago. Take a look at George Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), which seemed fantastic when it was first published in 1949. Now it seems prophetic.

Most popular pieces of fiction stand the test of both time and popularity, of being engaging on a second and third read/watch. They are good because the writers saw something nobody did. Their imagination connected with some deep fear, love, knowledge or emotion inside of us. It is this connect at a visceral level that is at the heart of a good story. It is also the origin, the Gogotri, of all things entertainment — books, games, films, shows or plays.

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# Must-watch Olympic movies



YES, BUT...

SANDEEP GOYAL

Any list of must-watch Olympic movies must invariably start with *Chariots of Fire* and must end with *Munich*. But I presume most of us have seen both these classics over the years. That is why my picks for today are more recent — not the usual age-old favourites that get counted every time the theme is the Olympics.

My first must-watch is the 2014 release, *The Gabby Douglas Story*. This biopic follows US Olympian Gabby Douglas, the first Black gymnast to become the individual all-around champion in the 2012 London Olympics. She also became the first US gymnast to win gold in both the individual and team competitions at the same Olympics, which blazed a trail for other Black gymnasts to strive for similar success. This success story triggered the 2018 release, *The Simone Biles Story: Courage to Soar*, which celebrates Olympic gymnast Simone

Biles' rise to the top at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Now set to compete in the 2024 Paris Olympics, Biles has become the most decorated gymnast in history with seven Olympic medals. Both movies are just fabulous. Riveting. Powerful narrations.

The 2016 release *Race* is the next on my must-watch list. *Race* explores the true story of African-American athlete Jesse Owens. He won a record-breaking four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, but his achievements didn't come without heartbreaking racial tensions and discrimination. The film is brilliantly directed and acted, with a strong, gripping script.

Another 2016 release on my list is *Eddie the Eagle*. Starring Hugh Jackman and Taron Egerton, the biographical film follows British skier Michael "Eddie" Edwards. He became the first athlete to represent Great Britain in the ski jumping event at the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics since 1926, gaining international attention in ways he didn't see coming. If ever there was a feel-good movie, this is it! Based on a true story, this film is suspenseful, dramatic and hilarious all in one, resulting in an insanely entertaining feature. Taron Egerton is brilliant as hero Eddie Edwards. He conveys emotion so well that you feel every feeling, every failure and every triumph. He is

perfect as the nerd, likeable hero and champion. Hugh Jackman is perfectly cast as a has-been champion who unwillingly becomes Eddie's coach. His famous "Bo Derek" scene is a riot — fabulously hilarious and brilliantly acted.

Another of my favourite watches is the 2014 release *Foxcatcher*. Channing Tatum, Mark Ruffalo and Steve Carell star in the Oscar-nominated film following the true story of millionaire E.I. du Pont and 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympic gold medalists Mark and David Schultz. As du Pont hires the wrestling siblings to help coach other athletes striving for success in the next Olympics in Seoul, Korea, it also comes with a detrimental sacrifice. At its heart is a story of brotherly love and rivalry that turns sour, sordid, and ultimately tragic. Gripping. But gory.

The 2022 movie *The Boys in the Boat* is another super watch. It follows the rowing team hailing from the University of Washington in the 1930s. Their goal is to compete in the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, and it all comes with its share of trials and tribulations, including world tensions that would later come to light ahead of World War II. It's unexceptionally filmed and occasionally clunky, but this is a gently heart-warming underdog story you will love to see.

Another nice one to watch is

*Richard Jewell*, a 2019 release. The Clint Eastwood-directed biographical movie is based on a *Vanity Fair* article and follows a security guard as he discovers a bomb during the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics. As the guard tells authorities to go and defuse the bomb, he ends up being wrongfully accused of planting the device himself. It is an Olympics-related story, yes, but it is texturally different. Wonderful narrative.

There's another 2022 release you must not miss is *The Swimmers*. Starring real-life sisters Natalie and Manal Issa, this film explores the coming-of-age story of Syrian refugees Yusra and Sarah Mardini. As the two escape the country on a dinghy and help 18 other refugees safely across the Aegean Sea, Yusra's talent for swimming leads her on a journey to the 2016 Rio Olympics. A very heart-warming narrative that goes beyond the usual Olympics theme.

Last but not least, my final must-watch is a film from across the border, from Pakistan, titled *Shah* — the biography of great boxer Syed Hussain Shah. This film covers the story of this legendary journey from being a homeless child on the streets of Layari, Karachi to becoming an Olympian for his country.

Enjoy!  
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## OPINION

The  
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{ OUR TAKE }

## Reservation redistribution

Supreme Court's ruling on quotas within quota will help reservation reach the most backward, as new political paradigms emerge

The gains of reservation — despite its goal of driving equity — have flowed unequally. The dominance of some groups arising from various factors has been clear for some time now and, in the process, the marginalisation of other communities has become entrenched. It is this unmooring of reservation that the Supreme Court has tried to set right by upholding sub-categorisation within the quotas for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). The apex court overruled its own 2004 judgment in *EV Chinnaiah v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, in which it had held such sub-categorisation was unconstitutional.

The 6:1 majority verdict recognises the heterogeneity within the reserved categories. Relative social privilege and political clout have led to a few groups enjoying almost all the benefits of reservations while others languish in backwardness that is largely unchanged since Independence. To illustrate, the Jatavs in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the Mahars in Maharashtra have long been the most visible beneficiaries of reservation within the states' SC population, thanks to their political heft, at the cost of smaller groups such as Pasis and Balmikis in UP, and Mangs in Maharashtra. And, among tribes, Santhals in Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand have a history of accessing reservation which outstrips that of other tribal communities by leagues. This is because Santhals have much higher literacy rates than other tribal groups, having taken to modern education since the 1960s, and, therefore, are more aware of the rights and benefits carved out for STs. The reserved categories' heterogeneity is mirrored in the strata-within-stratum manner in which caste discrimination operates. This reality has long been recognised by the states, and few have used sub-categorisation as redress. While Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu made it a lodestone for social justice, Punjab, where a third of the population is SC, created a 50% quota within SC reservation for two of its most oppressed SC communities. The *EV Chinnaiah* judgment, however, was used to block attempts by states to address the unremedied backwardness of certain groups. Thus, Thursday's judgment paves the way for states to focus on uplifting the more marginalised communities among those eligible for SC/ST reservations, apportioning quotas within the quotas based on empirical and rational criteria.

A string of concurrent judgments also called for setting a creamy layer limit to SC/ST reservations, seeking to expand a concept hitherto limited to Other Backward Classes (OBC). Since the Court hasn't laid out any strict criteria, it'll be up to the states to look into the advisory, though political and social opposition to such barriers will be intense.

The consequences of the verdict are likely to be sweeping and immediate. The judgment needs to be operationalised in a manner that allows for the most marginalised groups to benefit the most, but it is hard to ignore the reality that reservation has long been used as a political tool. Already, some states such as Telangana have said they'll institute sub-quotas for communities such as Madigas, fulfilling a long-pending demand. It is only to be expected that parties will use quotas to lure smaller groups — after all, the Dalit vote is no longer homogenous.

Along with the Justice G Rohini commission — created to examine sub-categorisation of OBC reservation — this verdict has the potential to create new political paradigms.

## Quarrying and the rains: Chronicles of disaster foretold

Stone quarrying has been going on in Western Ghat states despite there being a close link between hard rock quarrying and slope failures in the form of landslides, such as the one that devastated Wayanad this week

Governments would like to lay the entire blame for the recent Wayanad landslide and the humongous loss of lives on the very heavy rains, claiming that the whole range of human interventions, such as quarrying of the rocks in the vicinity and levelling of the land to create tourist resorts with their lakes had no role to play in triggering this tragedy.

However, the intense rains themselves may be related to such activities as quarrying rocks. India is characterised by the world's highest levels of aerosols, minute particles emanating from dust from construction, mining and quarrying, pulverising rocks to produce mechanical sand, automobile emissions, and burning of coal in thermal power plants. As water vapour in air laden with aerosols begins to condense, it initially forms myriads of small water droplets. These then coalesce to form larger, heavy water drops that lead to intense rain over shorter periods. So, what would otherwise have constituted a gentle drizzle lasting six hours, now beats down intensely for 30 minutes. The Konkan, the Western Ghats crestline and the adjoining Deccan Plateau regions of Maharashtra experienced such an intense lashing of rainfall last on June 22, 2021, while areas of Kerala suffered this again in mid-October that year. People in the hilly districts of Maharashtra are convinced that never have there been such severe episodes of very intense rain concentrated over a short period of time.

The floods of August 2018, preceded by unusually high rainfall, were the worst experienced by Kerala in nearly a century. Over 483 people died, and 140 went missing. The highly reputed

River Research Centre (RRC) in Chalakudy, Kerala, has provided a detailed and instructive case study of the 2018 floods. The Chalakudy basin has a number of dams. In 2018, the catchments of the river received good rainfall from the second half of May, with a few high rainfall spells in June and July. The dams were quickly getting filled, and the monsoon was still very active, not even halfway through. Hence, it was evident that once the series of dams were full, heavy spells of rain would result in substantially higher floods. From July 17, 2018 onwards, RRC experts and the Chalakudy River Protection Forum made futile attempts to alert government officials of the need to take preventive measures, such as initiating the gradual release of water from the various dams to reduce the threat of severe floods. This was ignored, and it is certain that the maximum flood level could have been reduced by at least 1-2 metres, had there been enough storage space in the reservoirs.

The intense rains during the monsoon of 2021 in Konkan districts also led to several major landslides that took a heavy toll on human lives. The worst was at Taliye in Raigad district in which 124 people were killed. This is a region plagued by unregulated rock quarries that engage in extensive blasting along with deforestation triggered by road construction. A road is under construction to connect Khed to Mahabaleswar through Hatlot Ghat. No provision is made to permit the flow of water, which consequently stagnates along the road. This resulted in a landslide at Birmani in Khed taluka, killing two people and five cattle.

**EVEN WHEN LANDSLIDES HIT KOOTTICKAL IN KERALA ON OCTOBER 16, 2021, THE QUARRIES CONTINUED OPERATION. LOCALS SAID THAT SOUNDS OF EXPLOSIONS FROM THE QUARRIES COULD BE HEARD DURING THE DISASTER**



Madhav Gadgil



Governments would like to lay the entire blame for the Wayanad landslide on the heavy rains. However, the intense rains themselves may be related to such activities as quarrying

These landslides and disasters in the Konkan region of Maharashtra in June-July 2021 were followed by a series of similar disasters in the Kottayam and Idukki districts of Kerala around October 16, 2021. As in Maharashtra, landslides were accompanied by intense rainfall. And, just as in Maharashtra, in Kerala, rock quarries and similar disturbances were associated with the tragedies. In Kerala, the worst to suffer was Plappally in Kootickal in Kottayam. A number of quarries have been operating in this region for over a decade, adversely affecting people in many ways, and people had been agitating to stop their operation. The quarry operators paid no heed, and the quarries did not stop work even during torrential rains. So, even when landslides hit Kootickal on October 16, the quarries continued operation. Locals said that sounds of explosions from the quarries could be heard during the disaster. Although only three quarries are mentioned in the official data, more than 17 were spotted in the satellite image. As many as 5,924 quarries continue functioning in Kerala despite such calamities. In fact, the state government approved 223 new quarries after the 2018 floods. This is going on, although it is well established that there is a close link between hard rock quarrying and slope failures in the form of landslides.

In Kadanad, about 25 km as the crow flies from Kootickal, an attempt was made to put together carefully compiled information to combat this menace. In 2008, Maju Puthenkandam, as the president of the Kadanad *panchayat*, set up the Biodiversity Management Committee, whose activities were coordinated by several experts and volunteers in all 13 wards of the *panchayat*. By pooling together information from all farmers and other members of the community, Puthenkandam and the committee prepared the People's Biodiversity Register. This document noted that the quarrying of rocks in the biodiversity-rich Perumkunnu Hills was detrimental to it and should be halted. This report was endorsed by the Kerala State Biodiversity Board. The Kerala high court examined this case in 2012 and upheld the Kadanad *gram panchayat's* decision not to allow quarrying as it was based on solid evidence. Vested interests then swung into action and alleged that the *panchayat* was being declared as an ecologically sensitive area, and farmers and people would only suffer even more by coming under the tyranny of the forest department. Regrettably, the forest department is serving as a tool of moneyed interests, and by harassing people, turns them against environmental protection. Due to this pressure, the Kadanad *panchayat* withdrew the resolution. But, a beginning has been made and one can only hope that this will lead to fruitful action in the new ICT revolution age.

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## West Bengal's connect to the modern Olympics

The United States (US) is the most successful country in the history of the Olympics, with over 1,000 gold medals since 1896. When women competed for the first time at the Paris Olympics in 1900, the first American woman to win gold was golfer Margaret Ives Abbott, who was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 1878.

The founder of the modern Olympics movement, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, was against women competing at the Olympics, and the first Olympics of the modern era at Athens in 1896 had no sportswomen among the 241 competitors from 14 nations. However, he relented when the Olympics were held for the second time, this time in his birthplace. Here, 22 women competed in five sports — tennis, golf, sailing, equestrian, and croquet. The exact number of participants is not conclusively known but is thought to be upwards of 1,200 from an estimated 28 nations.

Bengal has a unique connect to the Olympics, dating back to the first modern episode of the games at Athens, where the Olympics movement was revived a few millennia after the times of ancient Greece.

Charles Henry Stuart Gmelin took part in the very first athletics event in the modern Olympics, the first heat of the 100 metres (m) race where he came third and failed to qualify

for the final. However, his bronze in the 400m race makes him the first-ever medalist from Great Britain. Gmelin was born in 1872 in Krishnanagar, Nadia district of Bengal, where his father was a missionary. And just three years later, Norman Gilbert Pritchard, India's first Olympic medalist, was born in Calcutta.

This remarkable trio of sportspersons, all born in Bengal in the 1870s, were followed by sprinter Purma Banerjee (born in Calcutta, 1897), who took part in the 100m race when India first sent a contingent to the Olympics (Antwerp, Belgium, in 1920) and was among the 241 competitors from 14 nations. Another sprinter who was part of the official Indian contingent to Paris in 1924, James Stanton Hall, was born in 1903 in the Bengal capital and competed in the 100m, 200m, and 400m races. He also competed in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics but sadly died of typhoid just a year later in Calcutta.

Gmelin left India when young and, like his father, became a missionary, dying in Oxford in 1950. This was unlike Pritchard, whose family had deep roots in Bengal, going back to the 1780s and extending to the 1940s, before his descendants settled in England, where they are still living.

Pritchard received his education at St. Xavier's, Calcutta, and was a brilliant all-round



Calcutta-born Norman G Pritchard was one of the leading sprinters in the world

sportsman, excelling in athletics, football (scorer of the first hat-trick in an Indian tournament), rowing, rugby (represented England against Scotland in an expatriate match at Eden Gardens, Calcutta in 1897), tennis, and golf. He was one of the leading sprinters and hurdlers in the world, and travelled to Paris in 1900 after competing in numerous athletics events in England.

At Paris, he competed in five track events, winning silver in the 200m dash and 200m hurdles (since discontinued). He also participated in the 60m, 100m (failed to qualify for finals), and 110m hurdles, where he reached the final but failed to finish the race after a bad start. After leaving India for good in 1905, Pritchard made a name for himself in the theatre in England and then in silent movies in Hollywood under the screen name of Norman Trevor. He died in California in 1929. His descendants keep his memory alive, with most male relatives named Norman, Gilbert, or Trevor.

At least Pritchard knew all his adult life he was an Olympian and a medalist at that. That's more than can be said for Margaret Abbott (later Margaret Dunne), who remained unaware of her place in sporting history till her death in Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1955. And she was not the only one. Many 1900 Olympians went to their graves unaware that the competitions they took part in were part of the second modern Olympics.

The Paris Olympics were very poorly organised, stretched to six months, without an opening and closing ceremony, and were held concurrently with the Paris World's Fair or Exposition Universelle, which added to the confusion. Further, the majority of winners were not even presented medals — Margaret herself was given a porcelain bowl for finishing first, carding a score of 47 over nine holes, with her mother, Mary, finishing seventh out of the nine golfers.

The family moved back to Chicago after Margaret's father's death in Calcutta in 1879 when she was just a year old. She was studying art in Paris when she decided to enter the golf event, a sport she had learned at the Chicago Golf Club in Wheaton, Illinois.

Margaret's own family — all accomplished writers — and the greater Olympic family worldwide were ignorant of her place in sporting history till 80 years later when research by professor Paula Welch at the University of Florida unearthed the fact and ensured she gained her rightful place as the first in a glorious line of American women Olympic champions.

Gulu Ezekiel is the author of 17 sports books, including *Great Indian Olympians* (with K Arumugam). The views expressed are personal

{ ANOTHER DAY }

Namita Bhandare



## Anti-conversion laws exude fear of independent women

Four years after it passed a law ostensibly to prevent fraudulent religious conversions, the Uttar Pradesh government has decided to get tougher. The maximum punishment for marrying a woman by deceiving her or converting her religion is now life imprisonment, instead of the earlier 10 years. Earlier, only a family member could lodge a complaint, now anybody can. Bail conditions are at par with the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Versions of the anti-conversion law have been passed by eight Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP)-ruled states where, according to Census 2011, 40.34% of our population lives. The laws require prior permission from a state official to convert. Interfaith marriages without *sarkari* approval are null and void. And while such marriages aren't actually banned, conversion for marriage is now practically impossible in these states.

Of course, there is the Special Marriage Act (SMA), 1954 under which couples can marry. However, the SMA requires a one-month notice to be posted in public with the names, phone numbers and addresses of the

couple, making them vulnerable to vigilante groups and their own families. So, for an interfaith couple, according to the Law Commission in a 2018 report, conversion is often the more expedient alternative.

The anti-conversion laws are clear about their intent. The Uttarakhand version claims "several instances" where "people convert themselves to the other religion only for the purpose of marriage with the girl [sic] of that religion and after marriage, they got that girl [sic] converted to their own religion." You get the gist. More than marriage, these unconstitutional laws curtail the autonomy of women. In modern India, the idea of a sexually independent adult woman is so frightening that *khap panchayats* in Haryana recently reiterated their demand for a law mandating parental consent for love marriages. This is not the loony fringe. The idea was also debated in the Gujarat assembly.

Eighteen months after the Supreme Court transferred separate petitions challenging the anti-conversion laws from eight states to itself, it is yet to hold its first hearing. Why is this a priority in a country where parents

kill their daughters in the name of honour?

Meanwhile, in January, the Allahabad high court (HC) refused to grant protection to eight interfaith couples, saying their marriages were not compliant with the anti-conversion law. In June, the Madhya Pradesh HC refused, bizarrely, to protect a Muslim man and Hindu woman seeking to marry under the SMA.

Over seven decades after Independence, after gaining hard-won rights, women are still being infantilised and treated as gullible people incapable of making their own decisions in love and marriage. This is the very definition of a nanny State taking control over citizens in the name of "protection".

Manu, the law-giver, believed women must not be granted independence, and should remain under the control of their fathers, husbands and, finally, sons.

Manu is believed to have lived in the fourth century BC. We are now in 2024, but some ideas, it would seem, haven't changed.

Namita Bhandare writes on gender. The views expressed are personal

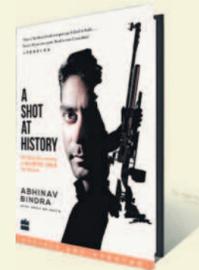
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

### EYES ON THE PRIZE

With Swapnil Kusale, Sarabjot Singh and Manu Bhaker's podium finish at the ongoing Paris Olympics, the Indian shooting contingent has delivered its best-ever Olympics performance. In the ever-challenging quest for the podium at the only truly global sporting gala, Indian shooters have consistently proved their mettle since Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore clinched the silver at Athens 2004. It was followed by Abhinav Bindra's historic win in 2008, India's first-ever individual Olympic gold.

This week, we recommend *A Shot at History*, co-authored by Abhinav Bindra and Rohit Brijnath, which delves into Bindra's journey. With Brijnath's engaging prose, the book vividly portrays the intense training, psychological battles, and the intricate world of competitive shooting. Bindra's vulnerability and determination shine through, making it a compelling read for anyone seeking insights into what goes into an epic Olympic pursuit.



**A Shot at History:** Abhinav Bindra, Rohit Brijnath  
Year: 2011



You may think, at first, I'm as mad as a hatter when I tell you a cat must have three different names

T S Eliot

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

## LEVELLING THE FIELD FOR POOREST OF POOR WITH SC SUB-QUOTA

By allowing states to sub-categorise the Scheduled Castes for targeted reservation to uplift the most marginalised among their lot, a seven-judge bench of the Supreme Court took an incremental step on affirmative action. Over the years, sub-quota laws for SCs were formulated in a few states despite a five-judge bench's bar in the *Chinniah* case in 2004, when it ruled against any subdivision of what it saw as a homogeneous stratum. But the seven-judge bench led by Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud demolished the premise of homogeneity. Its 6:1 verdict said the Constitution does not even define SCs except placing them on a presidential list, adding there is a wide gulf between the socio-economic conditions of castes within that basket. Whether the verdict would trigger tectonic forces of competing claims for SC sub-quotas, disturbing the present equilibrium, remains to be seen. To stem the possible rush for political expediency, the majority verdict said sub-classification can be done only on the basis of quantifiable data of backwardness and skewed representation in government jobs. In allowing the sub-quota, it went by a nine-judge bench's ruling in the *Indra Sawhney* case that determined other backward classes were heterogeneous and deserved sub-classification.

The other important point the judges dealt with on skimming out the 'creamy layer' as is being done among the OBCs. While the CJI and Justice Manoj Misra ducked it, four other judges who were with the majority verdict, justices B R Gavai, Vikram Nath, Pankaj Mithal and Satish Chandra Mishra, suggested a scheme to identify and eliminate the creamy layer. Justice Gavai, the lone Dalit on the bench, said the criteria for exclusion of the creamy layer from SC/STs could be different from that for the OBCs. Justice Bela Trivedi wrote the lone dissent.

The judicial push to eliminate the SC creamy layer has been on since 2006, but it has faced multiple appeals. The concept gained momentum with the latest verdict. But would the ruling party, that saw its Dalit votes shifting away in UP in the recent election, want to go anywhere near the creamy layer and be branded anti-SC? Justice Mithal went to the other extreme by ruling that reservation must be limited to the first generation or one generation in a family. That appeared to be more of a wishful thinking than a practical solution.

## AP NEEDS MORE FROM CENTRE TO KEEP PROMISES

In a departure from tradition, instead of presenting a full-fledged budget, the Chandrababu Naidu-led Andhra government promulgated an ordinance for vote-on-account with an estimated expenditure of ₹1.29 lakh crore for a period of four months. The reason was that the state finance department was still finalising the liabilities and resources. It sounds reasonable as the new government assumed charge in the second half of June. The government is likely to present the full budget in September.

What is of concern is not the vote-on-account, but the chief minister's remarks that the state's finances are in a terrible shape. He released a white paper on the issue that paints a bleak picture. The white paper says the overall debt stands close to ₹10 lakh crore and outstanding bills are at over ₹1 lakh crore. The state's own resources are not enough to meet essential expenditures like salaries and pensions. The paper has been disputed by the opposition YSR Congress. What cannot be disputed though is that the state is on a sticky wicket. Revenues have gone up over the last decade barring the Covid years, but so has expenditure, with welfare schemes accounting for a lion's share. All avenues to incur debt have already been explored, which leaves Naidu with little elbow room. He has promised much more than his predecessor Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy. New schemes such as free bus travel for women, higher investment for farmers, dole for the unemployed and education subsidy for each child would cost the exchequer more than the ₹2.7 lakh crore spent on welfare in the last five years. On top, the mandate to complete the Polavaram irrigation project and develop capital Amaravati would increase the financial burden.

Naidu is riding a tiger, in the sense that there appears to be only one way forward. The Centre's announcement of ₹15,000-crore aid for Amaravati must be re-negotiated to make it a grant. The Polavaram project's terms must be amended as the Centre had set a condition of paying at 2014 prices, whereas the AP Reorganisation Act clearly states it is the Centre's responsibility to build the project. The implementation of schemes could be staggered, which might invite a backlash; but the government must be bold enough to prioritise them. Without changes, the state could end up staring at a debt trap.

### QUICK TAKE

#### MUMMIES RETURN TO SHED LIGHT

MUMMIES have been the stuff of adrenaline-pumping fiction from Tintin's Incan menace Rasputin to Rick O'Connell's epic fights with some Egyptian varieties. In reality, they inform history in various ways. New research on them led by Cairo University's radiology professor Sahar Saleem is questioning the ancient links between Egypt and the Indian subcontinent. Their discovery of henna and juniper as embalming materials may push back by centuries the trade between south Asia and Egypt, a route through which cotton travelled over at least a millennium. Will some of our researchers be given funds and freedom to tie up the threads from this end? We hope so.

RECENTLY, I went on a visit to Kolkata and rediscovered Sulekha. Depending on which part of India you grew up in, at one point, Sulekha was a household name. Those were the days of fountain pens and ink. Who cares about fountain pens today? In this electronic world, writing is fast dying out. To the extent that writing on paper remains, but writing instruments mean ballpoint and gel pens. Fountain pens have a whiff of nostalgia about them. But rarely do people use them.

While that statement is generally true, some fountain pen connoisseurs and aficionados still remain. There is a market, limited though it is, for fountain pens and ink. Who caters to that market? What fountain pen ink do people buy? Depending on taste—Pilot, Waterman, Lamy, Mont Blanc, Sailor, Diamine, Noodlers and so on. (Sheaffer is now Indian, having been acquired by William Penn.)

What is a fountain pen? Unlike dip pens of the past, a fountain pen possesses an internal reservoir of ink. You don't need to dip the pen into an ink pot. Once upon a time, fountain pens needed 'eye-droppers'. (They are still available.) You use a dropper to directly fill ink into the barrel. Smudges in pockets and inky fingers are associated with such eye-droppers. These days, it is either a cartridge or a converter. A cartridge is plug-and-play and is often proprietary, not interchangeable between one pen and another. With a cartridge, there is no choice over the ink. One is stuck with whatever the cartridge-maker provides. That's the reason many people prefer converters, where the ink goes into a tube-like gadget.

Sheaffer apart, which are the Indian ink makers and can they hold up to global competition? Bril, Sulekha, Camlin, Syahi, Krishna—you take your pick. One of the earliest was Sulekha, identified with the swadeshi movement. Satish Chandra Dasgupta had retired as chief chemist of Bengal Chemicals. Circa 1932, Mahatma Gandhi requested him to make a swadeshi ink. Satish Chandra came up with an ink named 'Krishnadhara', meaning black flow. It was sold through khadi outlets.

Dasgupta passed on the recipe to two brothers, Shankaracharya Maitra and Nani Gopal Maitra, for better commercial production. Thus, the manufacturing unit was set up as Sulekha Works in Rajshahi (now in Bangladesh) in 1934.

It was one of the earliest fountain pen inks made in India. Bengal's labour militancy forced the company shut in 1991. There is a colourful revival on now

## SULEKHA: A SWADESHI INK FLOWS AGAIN

BIBEK DEBROY

Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister



MANDAR PARODKAR

Sulekha means 'beautiful writing'. There is an urban legend that the name was suggested by Rabindranath Tagore. But there is no evidence to substantiate this. In the late 1930s, Sulekha moved to Kolkata. There is a place in Jadavpur in South Kolkata famous as 'Sulekha More', or Sulekha Crossroads.

When we were in school, Sulekha was the ubiquitous ink. Each bottle of 'Royal Blue' was sold with a photograph of Gandhiji on the package. Sulekha also exported ink and set up factories on a turnkey basis in African countries. There is a report that says, in the early 1980s, Sulekha had a market share of 89 percent for ink in eastern India.

Indeed, the 'favourite' ink varied, depending on the part of the country and

the age profile of the respondent. Some will say Quink, others Camlin.

The founder of Camlin Subhash Dandekar recently passed away. Before the advent of liquid ink, all ink used to be in the form of dust and tablets to be dissolved in water to make ink. The tablets originally made by Camlin used to be called Horse. That was later changed to Camel to convey the impression of lasting a long time, since a camel can survive without water for a long period of time. Camel plus ink became Camlin.

In common with other entrepreneurship in West Bengal, from the late 1970s, thanks to labour militancy, enterprises were hounded out and there was capital flight. It was no different with Sulekha.

## MACHINE-MADE FAKE RESEARCH LEADING TO DIGITAL INBREEDING

RESEARCH recently published in *Nature* suggests that intelligent machines planning to replicate themselves for world domination are doomed to failure. This means that the *Terminator* genre of science fiction stands discredited. But we mustn't despair, because a fun hack has shown that following the loosening of norms in scientific publishing and the entry of digital entities in education, even a house cat can pose as a renowned scientist and get away with it.

The present learned cat is Larry Richardson. He is technically the uncle of researcher Reese Richardson, since he is his grandmother's cat. He was enrolled into the research rat race to overawe pioneering Siamese cat academic FDC Willard, whose initials stand for Felis Domesticus Chester. FDC Willard is not a fraud. He studies helium. He entered STEM when his human, professor emeritus of physics and astronomy at Michigan State University, Jack Hetherington, wrote a paper solo using the royal 'we'. Instead of laboriously replacing 'we' with 'I' throughout, he promoted his cat to researcher and shared credit with him.

Hetherington & Willard produced real work, which was really cited. The fact that FDC Willard became a popular meme cat does not detract from the physics he lent his awesome name to. In contrast, Larry signed off on completely fake papers generated using SCigen and Mathgen, services that write up garbage papers in computer science and math using compelling technical jargon. These prank services help show how easily rubbish can be published to increase academic ratings, cutting through safeguards and bypassing peer review. A journal discredited itself by accepting the first Mathgen garbage paper in 2012, and 12 years later, Larry has used the same service to breach the ceiling for learned cats.

Reese Richardson generated 12 fake papers by Larry, complete with references and citations, and used them to give the cat a fine profile on Google Scholar, whose ratings universities consult when hiring. The hack is to upload garbage papers to Researchgate, wait for Google to pick them up, then delete them. They linger on Google Scholar and the process costs nothing.

This issue is important because over the last decade, there's been a wave of fake academic journals and papers. In Covid years, standards were relaxed and unvetted pre-prints became commonplace as researchers rushed to bring vaccines to the market in

record time, and the wave swelled into a tsunami. Authorship is now sold as a commodity, both freelance and via 'paper mills'—pay up, and you can be named lead researcher of a real or garbage paper. Journals have grown faster than papers in volume, indicating some of them are garbage bins.



PRATIK KANJILAL

For years, the author has been speaking easy to a surprisingly tolerant public

### SPEAKEASY

Reese Richardson published papers in academic journals supposedly co-authored with his grandmother's cat, Larry. A service that helped the cat's 'career' claimed to have helped Indians too. The tsunami of AI-generated work is dangerous because governments can make big decisions based on it

The world's most populous country has contributed to the problem since 2010, when UGC made it compulsory for Indian college teachers to publish research to advance careers. Since India has thousands of institutions without trained staff, funds or infrastructure fit to conduct research, plagiarism and fakery have boomed. Larry's academic career began when Reese Richardson's attention was drawn to a service that offered to improve profiles on Google Scholar. All but two of the scholars it claimed to have helped were Indians.

With the rapid entry of AI into almost all aspects of life, fake content is no longer just an academic concern. For financial gain, AI is being used to fill millions of sites with garbage. Since AIs are trained on terabytes of content scraped from the internet, it is

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### War economies

Ref: World leaders must join hands to stop war in West Asia (Aug 2). As weapons trade is an important economic aspect for most developed countries, expecting them to bring peace can only be a myth. They need more wars to sustain their economy. India is also reaping the benefits of the Russian war.

A G Rajmohan, Anantapur

#### Growing crisis

The human species has the means to annihilate itself. Further escalation will not only lead to dire economic consequences but also to a bigger humanitarian crisis. Hence it is the best time for the world leaders to shed their differences and work towards cooling tempers in West Asia.

R Pichumani, Kumbakonam

#### Army accomplishment

The Indian Army did a great job by replacing the broken bridge at Chooramala in Wayanad by a prefabricated Bailey bridge. It is a job that can be accomplished only by the Corps of Engineers in the army. It will ensure the rescue efforts can reach the people in need faster.

Raju Mathai, Kochi

#### Cheaper insurance

West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee's call for removal of GST on life and medical insurance premiums, in line with Nitin Gadkari's demand, is welcome. In his letter to Nirmala Sitharaman, Gadkari said levying GST on life insurance premiums amounts to taxing the uncertainties of life. Withdrawing GST would reduce the cost of premiums, which would in turn encourage more people to obtain life and health coverage.

S Sankaranarayanan, Chennai

#### Landmark judgement

Ref: Sub-classification of SCs by states valid, rules top court (Aug 2). The top court has delivered a landmark judgement in this case. The states now have the onus to act with care. The identification of sub-castes should be based on unchallengeable evidence and reason.

D V G Sankara Rao, Vizianagaram

#### Choosing keeper

The new Indian cricket team coach Gautam Gambir and captain Rohit Sharma have the new headache of selecting the playing XI against Sri Lanka for the first ODI to be played in Colombo. The most difficult would be to select a wicketkeeper-batsman. K L Rahul may be the best option, as he has proved to be a better keeper-batsman, that too after his return from injury. Though Rishabh Pant too has rejoined the team after surgery, he seems to be struggling a bit.

N Mahadevan, Chennai



## A thought for today

I am building a fire, and every day I train. I add more fuel. At just the right moment, I light the match

MIA HAMM

## Games Watch

Cool moments from Week 1 that got us buzzing

It's been only a week since the Paris Olympics kicked off. But there hasn't been a dearth of iconic 'cool moments'. In a sensational victory, Indian men's hockey team gave us another 'chak de' moment by besting Australia in the Olympics for the first time in 52 years. Earlier, ace-shooter and double-medallist Manu Bhaker showed why she is the most sorted 22-year-old when she refused to own the 'legend' tag saying, "I always believe in karma."

At the other end of the spectrum was 51-year-old Yusuf Dikec. Oozing calm and sporting an uber casual look – he could have passed for anyone's uncle among the spectators – the Turkish shooter didn't even need special shooting glasses or gear to win a silver medal for his country. That led to a social media meme-fest with Dikec being variously described as 'Daddy Cool' and 'Turkish hit-man'. Not far behind in the cool list was South Korea's silver-medallist shooter Kim Yeji, who had the internet excited over her killer attire and ice-cold demeanour, sparking comparisons to hit manga-anime character Satoru Gojo from Jujutsu Kaisen.



Meanwhile, the selfie of the week surely goes to the winners of the mixed doubles table tennis event that saw athletes from South Korea, North Korea and China come together in a viral photo-frame. At a time when the North has been sending trash-filled balloons to the South, such Olympic bonhomie is indeed welcome.

And then there were standout displays of grit and determination. Egyptian fencer Nada Hafez took everyone by surprise when she declared after her round-of-16 sabre competition that she was competing seven-months pregnant. But the biggest comeback story was that of Uzbek judoka Diyora Keldiyorova's victory over defending Olympic champion Japan's Uta Abe. The latter had defeated Diyora in the final of the 2023 World Championships. But this time Diyora pulled off a shock victory, prompting her coach to remark on camera, "Anything is possible." That's Olympics for you.

## Ode To The Bucket

People to Parliament, it means so much to us

Aluminium, steel, copper or plastic, it's a rare life that hasn't had a bucket in it. For the very poor, a bucket is everything, to store water or to store their belongings. For the very rich, buckets are a big thing, too – all that investable dosh goes into buckets of assets. Food? Balti meat is standard fare at restaurants going ethno-chic. Buckets ferry khichdi far and near; at festivals and temple weddings. No wonder, a fast food chain offering fried chicken, struck a natural chord with its 'bucket'. Travel? Bucket list.



Winding queues of empty buckets capture the helplessness of water scarcity. We're possibly the only country with detergent packs named 'bucket-wash'. City residents too lazy to step down from upper reaches of tony apartments use buckets to swing up everyday grocery, fruits & veggies. Buckets are us – they bring comfort and affinity.

As skies tipped ungodly buckets of rain, buckets stood tall in Parliament, collecting water from leaks. Where there are ceilings in India, as GOI discovered, and large numbers of Indians already knew, there will be leaks. Parliament's blue plastic buckets cost less than a drop in the bucket for the ₹1,200cr+ building. When the roof leaked, Parliament looked awfully like a house of the people. But with that much money spent building it, we have to ask, has sound construction practice kicked the bucket?

## We Are In A World The Yuppie Made

It's about chasing money and status

Given how the US model has rippled across much of the world, *Triumph of the Yuppies: America, the Eighties, and the Creation of an Unequal Nation* by Tom McGrath tells a familiar story. It explores the social and economic factors that produced the yuppie, and how this class impacted politics, business, culture and cities.

If the 1960s were about idealism and the 70s about a search for the self, the 80s were all about money and status. *Newsweek* declared 1984 the Year of the Yuppie. Capitalism was being unshackled under Reagan. Wall Street reinvented itself. Young professionals moved back into cities,

a better place'. Feel-good fervour was everywhere. Fitness suddenly became an obsession, from Nautilus machines to Jane Fonda's workouts, aerobics and running. As yuppies jogged to work during a transit strike, sneakers became a status symbol, to show membership in this 'fast track' class.

Weekend and lifestyle sections sprang up in media, to teach people about food, fashion and art. Perrier, Cuisinart, Haagen-Dazs... catered to aspirations, as did expensive toys for boys (adult men). Brands became big, not because of craftsmanship or quality alone, but because they were about owning something others didn't.

This success ethic produced an arms race of luxury. Lifestyles of the rich and famous became public obsessions. TV shows like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, about rich people behaving badly, were widely watched, around the world.

Meanwhile, then-young New York property developer Donald Trump promised gold-plated monuments to glamour that 'only the rich can afford'. Former counterculture types, like Steve Jobs and Mitch Kapur, became savvy

businesspersons and tech entrepreneurs.

The Black Monday of Oct 19, 1987, when the stock market crashed, was dubbed the end of the yuppie era. But the ethos had taken deep root. Centrist politicians like Bill Clinton embodied it. Meanwhile, the rest of America expressed its antipathy by declaring yuppies 'elites', rather than the super-rich.

By 2016, the percentage of wealth owned by middle class had dropped to 17%. The rich owned 79% of America, up from 60% in the 1980s. Amid this yawning wealth and income gap, Trump persuaded working-class people he was on their side. The world that made the yuppie, and the world the yuppie made, is still our defining reality.

## mindfield

SHORT TAKES ON BIG IDEAS



## The Unscheduled Questions

Top court okayed subcategories in SC/STs. But... ● Will 'privileged' among SCs lose quotas? ● Does merit include social equality? ● Will intra-SC atrocity be criminalised?

Jay Vinayak Ojha



The Supreme Court's judgment in the *Davinder Singh* case, permitting sub-classification of 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes' for reservation purposes, is a landmark development. By allowing what was off-limits, it's likely to impact not just quota allocations for SC/STs, but also the politics around affirmative action in India.

Contrary to public perception, SCs constitute an amalgam of more than 1,200 castes across India's states and UTs, grouped together by Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950. Many states, noticing that a few castes were capturing a disproportionate number of SC seats, had tried to sub-divide the category to ensure adequate representation of the 'most backward' communities.

But such attempts by three states – Punjab, Haryana, and Tamil Nadu – were challenged and struck down basis SC's 2004 judgment in the *EV Chinniah* case. This held that 'Scheduled Castes' was a homogeneous category created by Constitution and could not be subdivided.

On Thursday, the apex court overruled that verdict by a majority of six to one, holding that SC/ST categories could be subdivided as long as there was substantial gap between 'less backward' and 'more backward' groups so created, and none of SCs in 1950 Order were wholly excluded from reservation benefits.

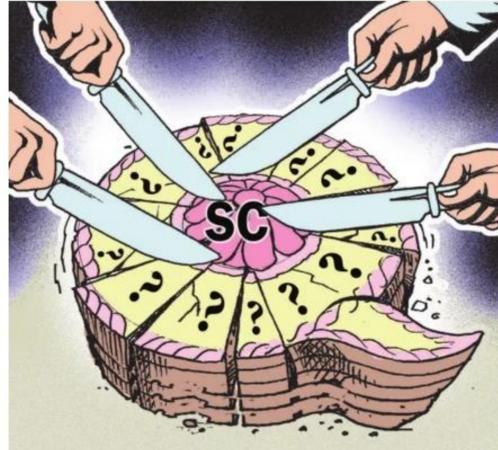
**Creamy layer a constitutional imperative?** The issue of sub-classification shouldn't be confused with that of the 'creamy layer'. While sub-classification entails differentiation based on community identity into 'more backward' and 'less backward' groups, the creamy layer principle operates basis wealth and income, and can place an individual outside the ambit of reservations entirely. The 'creamy layer' of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) has been excluded from reservations since the judgment in *Indra Sawhney*, but the issue has been more fraught when it came to SCs.

In Thursday's judgment, SC tilted heavily towards excluding the creamy layer of SC/STs from reservations. Whereas CJI sidestepped the issue, four concurring judges – Justices Gavai, Mithal, Sharma,

and Nath – concluded that the creamy layer principle was applicable to SC/STs. Justice Gavai and Mithal both pointed to the patent injustice of the child of an IAS or IPS officer benefitting from reservation.

If the 'majority of the majority' approach suggested by HM Seervai is followed, the decision of four out of the six judges in the majority would call for creation of criteria to identify the creamy layer among SC/STs.

**So, how to define equality?** Beneath the surface of concurrence, there are important differences of



approach among the judges. CJI laid emphasis on doctrine of 'substantive equality', that is, equality not just of opportunity but of outcome.

One of the reasons he cited in favour of sub-classification was achieving substantive equality between the 'more' and 'less' backward groups. He took this principle further, holding, for example, that any public examination or other method of distribution of seats must not just be open to all but "ensure factual equality". In his view, merit and reservation do not constitute opposing ideas at all. Rather, social equality and inclusivity are themselves aspects of merit.

These ideas did not find strong echoes in the concurring judgments. Justice Mithal quoted with approval Justice VR Krishna Iyer's dictum that "considerations of administrative capability" cannot be permanently subordinated to "harjian welfare". Furthermore, it remains to be seen how CJI's definition of merit would apply to posts such as those for which Justice Jeevan Reddy said in *Indra Sawhney*: "merit alone counts...super-specialties in medicine...airline pilots...technicians in nuclear and space applications."

Thus, a future bench may have to decide the extent to which a candidate's social backwardness contributes to his merit as a heart surgeon, nuclear technician, or for any other specialised job profile.

**Verdict throws up new questions** | This debate on whether reservations are an exception to the right to equality or an integral aspect of that right will be a core question when the apex court considers pending appeals from Bihar and Chhattisgarh seeking to challenge the 50% limit on caste-based reservations.

Another, more speculative, question is the ends that sub-categorisation may now serve. An exercise along the lines of Justice Rohini Commission, which looked at the possibility of sub-categorising OBCs, would now certainly be permissible for SC/STs.

But what of other facets of law? CJI comprehensively laid out the problem of inter-se backwardness and internal discrimination among SCs. He noted studies from Gujarat and Tamil Nadu which found that in many areas, some SC communities practise the most archaic forms of untouchability against those they consider ritually 'lower'.

If SC recognises such discrimination, it may call for a relook at the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. The legislation currently recognises SC/STs as a homogeneous bloc and doesn't countenance the possibility of a member of one SC community committing an atrocity against another.

In answering the constitutional question on permissibility of sub-categorisation, court has in fact posed to our political and social order far more profound questions on the future contours of reservations and caste politics. It is now up to the political class to answer them responsibly.

The writer is Project Fellow, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

## The France Beyond The Paris Olympics

Yes, the games are lovely. But the country's politics isn't. Macron is refusing to appoint a PM. The far-right didn't really lose. Suppressing anti-migrant sentiment doesn't make it go away

Ulrike Guérot



Amidst the cheers at the Paris Olympics, it doesn't seem to matter that the host country doesn't have a proper govt. Yet, when France faced off Argentina in the football quarterfinal, it wasn't just on the heels of the latter team having been spotted taunting the former's black and mixed-race players.

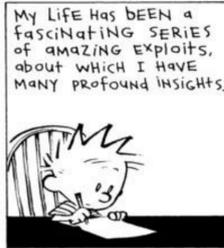
What also hung heavy in the air is how frontally Kylian Mbappé has taken on racism. How he has defied the clichés against mixing sports and politics, to go all out to warn voters against far-right parties.

In a surprising victory, France's 'Front Populaire', a quickly created alliance between the radical French left, some other small lefty parties from Communists to Trotskyists, more moderate socialists and the French Greens got an unexpected 178 seats in the July 7 elections. This was followed by festive crowds celebrating how the left alliance had held off Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* (RN). Yet, as the weeks and the Olympics roll on, the result is revealing itself to be a pyrrhic victory.

Before this, also unexpected was Macron's announcement of general elections. That, in turn, followed the unexpected landslide loss of his movement, *Ensemble*, in the European elections of May 9, where RN pulled ahead. *Barrage* – dam – against the right-wing flooding became the *mot d'ordre*: a whole country out to say *not a rightist takeover of France!*

But did RN really lose on July 7? Its parliamentary tally rose from 89 to 154. It clearly had the strongest increase of votes. This was rather annoying and had to be hidden from headlines. A whole national effort to successfully stop the right from winning made for much better headlines, especially with the Olympics around the corner.

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## No Task Is Small, We Must Accomplish It With Love

Swami Chinmayananda

When God made the world, according to our legend, he assigned various *devatas* to watch over His creation. The deities were delegated to watch over trees, flowers, animals, birds, and even common grass. Then one day, the deity presiding over the common grass became very angry and protested loudly. "Lord Jagadeeshvar has assigned to my brothers beautiful things to watch over – charming flowers, majestic trees, chirping birds, whispering brooks, and ferocious animals. But He appointed me only as the Lord of common grasses. As a protest, I will not watch over them any longer."

Within a short time, the deity of the trees came to the Lord complaining that they were dying up because the Earth had become hard and brown. Without

growing grass, the soil can no longer be soft and moist.

As the deity of the trees left, the *devata* of the flowers came to the Lord to complain that the flowers were not growing anymore because the roots of the delicate plants could not survive without the cool protection of the grass.

Finally, man cried out to the Lord, "O Sarveshvar! The animals are dying in the fields because there is no grass for them to feed upon. All the fruits and vegetables are drying up and withering away, because the soil is becoming hard like baked clay. Soon we too will die, both vegetarians and non-vegetarians, unless the grass flourishes again."

The arrogant deity of the grass listened to these complaints and the

silent Lord merely continued looking at him. Ashamed and sad for all the endless sorrows he had created in his foolishness, the *devata* of grass prostrated before the Lord of Lords and in repentance cried, "O Lord, forgive me and my vanity. I shall soon make the grass flourish."

As grass flourished once again, flowers bloomed, fruits ripened, animals got fattened and man once again became happy and content. The world was again lovely and alive, all because of common grass.

Like the deity of grass, we too must joyously strive in whatever situation we find ourselves and do our best in whatever we are called upon to do. Let us fulfil all our jobs as expressions of our love for Him, the Supreme Intelligence, Shri Jagadeeshvar, who has placed each one of us where we are.

Everyone has a precise place in the scheme of created things. Each is an important thread in the total tapestry of the universe and has a purpose. There is no redundancy in the Lord's creation. The good and even the bad being His manifestations serve His purpose. Nothing is to be condemned; none to be despised. Everything is He, and He alone is. No one is lowly in His eyes.

Let us each try to fulfil our obligatory duties as best as we can in a spirit of unattached joy, and dedication. The Lord places us in the exact environment needed for the exhaustion of our *vasanas*. Be thankful for what you have. Stop craving for what you have not. Let us pursue life in the field where we are placed because the omniscient Lord knows exactly what is required for our inner unfoldment.

The writer is the founder of Chinmaya Mission

## Sacredspace



Ignorance and prejudice are the handmaidens of propaganda. Our mission, therefore, is to confront ignorance with knowledge, bigotry with tolerance, and isolation with the outstretched hand of generosity. Racism can, will, and must be defeated.

Kofi Annan

# Hone In on Those Who Need Help Most

Stronger focus on economics for quota-shaping

This week, the Supreme Court allowed state governments to create sub-categories within SCs and STs, allowing benefits of reservations to reach the most needy subgroups within these categories. Economics doesn't provide ready answers to the question of how quotas, or any other form of affirmative action, affect the incentive structure in competitive environments. Both the preferred and non-preferred groups can slacken their effort, respectively, on account of necessity and utility. Yet, there's evidence to suggest a moderate degree of discrimination among two sets of contestants can be designed in public policy to improve incentives on either side of the divide. This causality, however, breaks down if discrimination is stronger (more quotas) or if the contest is among multiple sets (more sub-quotas). Each category of discrimination adds to the interplay of adverse incentives among all the contestants.

The incentive to perform among the preferred group is negatively correlated to the emergence of an even more preferred group within itself. The extra-preferred group will, on its part, have to be induced out of its historical discrimination to match up to performance of the less-preferred group. The non-preferred group will have no reason to perform differently if the overall quota stays intact. The incentive structure splinters with heterogeneous affirmative action. It splinters further when contestants are forced to remain within preference groups. To retain its incentive structure, the top layer of the preferred group must surrender its preference. A golfer's handicap improves with his game.

Subdivision of quotas will have to be a dynamic process to accommodate mobility of the top and bottom layers, and intermediate ones too. The process is an open auction of deprivation subject to judicial review. This is complicated by the politics of preference among competing groups. The most deserving groups may not have the political representation needed to secure their place in the hierarchy of discrimination. Stronger emphasis on economics to establish disadvantage and degree of discrimination it calls for could make the process less tricky. Effects on incentives must also figure in this decision process.



Illustration of people in traditional Indian attire.

Companies worldwide are benefiting from embracing neurodiversity – Indian offices must follow

# It Pays to Think Different



M Muneer & Tumpa Dey

For a growing number of enterprises, DEI — diversity, equity, inclusion — has become a critical pillar of success. It has become so mainstream in both corporate and political America that Kamala Harris has become the latest recipient of the slur 'DEI hire', shorthand to describe that the success or power for some people from a marginalised group is unearned, when the term was used by a Republican to describe the Democrat presidential candidate. While much focus has been placed on gender, race and sexual orientation, neurodiversity and neuro-inclusivity are also gaining attention in the DEI spectrum.

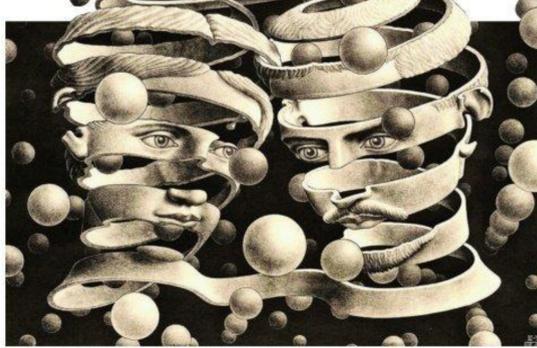
Neurodiversity is a popular term describing the fact that there are many variations of human functionality, and each variation needs to be understood and respected. Based on different studies, 15-20% of the human population is neurodiverse — including up to 10% diagnosed with dyslexia, 5% with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), and 1-2% with autism.

A National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (Nimhans) report says that nearly 2 mn Indians are neurodivergent and increasing in rate as an inherent part of human diversity and neurocognitive functioning.

Behaviours classified as 'different' vary widely because of varied expectations of social behaviours and social norms. Neurodiversity is



Peel-good factor: 'Bond of Union' (1956), M C Escher



Peel-good factor: 'Bond of Union' (1956), M C Escher

better understood with neuro-ableism, the belief that being neurotypical (people with no neurodivergence) is better for performance. Because of this, people who identify as neurodivergent may experience discrimination at workplaces where traditional jobs are typically based on neurotypical demands and habits. This may entail issues with communication styles, sensory processing and social interaction expectations.

Organisations can benefit from the differentiated thought processes of neurodiverse employees in the ever-changing business environment and be future-ready. According to a November 2023 article, 'Building the Neurodiversity Talent Pipeline for the Future of Work', in MIT Sloan Management Review, neurodivergent individuals are highly skilled in creativity, non-linear thinking, systems thinking, capable of hyper-focus and reverse engineering to solve complex problems.

The article has James Mahoney, head of JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work programme, citing an internal study that found autistic employees, when correctly onboarded, demonstrated up to 140% more productivity than neurotypical hires for the same position.

SAP Labs India has found that its Autism at Work initiative has contributed significantly to projects requiring high concentration and detail orientation, resulting in innovative solutions and improved productivity. DXC Tech India says ne-

urodiverse employees have shown exceptional problem-solving skills, particularly in complex data analysis and pattern recognition roles.

Infosys' initiatives resulted in increased retention and engagement. Employees who feel valued and understood are likelier to stay with the company and perform their best. TCS has launched several initiatives to hire such individuals, particularly those with autism. They seem to have excelled in software testing and quality assurance roles.

While such initiatives lead to positive organisational culture and employer-branding, companies like Dell, Caterpillar and Microsoft believe that these programmes help in more ways than just reputational enhancements. For them, productivity gains, quality improvement, a boost in innovative capabilities and a broad increase in employee engagement are real benefits.

What can organisations do to make their environment neuro-inclusive? **Widen the head hunt** Institute non-interview methods for assessing, training and managing neurodiverse talent because they do not respond well to usual interviewing methods. Implementing hiring practices that accommodate the needs of such candida-

tes is essential. Use skill-based assessments and provide clear and structured job descriptions.

**Flexi workspaces as muscle-flexing** HR departments must consider flexible workspaces, noise-cancelling headphones and modified work hours. Offices should ensure that these accommodations are readily available and communicated to all staff. People with autism often fail to maintain eye contact, are easily distracted by conversations and can be self-critical.

Microsoft, for instance, has special recruitment and workforce development initiatives to create a neurodivergent workforce. It provides a practical setting emphasising skill assessments, job competencies, networking and general career development.

**Neurodiversity-positive work environment** Employees should be made aware of neurodivergence through training. This training should include understanding different neurological conditions, effective ways to communicate with neurodivergents, and the importance of empathy and support. Just as it is useful for all employees to have a less toxic workplace, providing a sense of community and advocacy for their needs within the organisation will be helpful for productivity by reducing presenteeism and absenteeism.

However, organisations must remember that unless they create an environment of psychological safety devoid of stereotypes, their methods will end up as decorative solutions to a challenging

problem. Key to all this would be empathy, a pleasant workplace climate and an environment of awareness about neurodivergence.

That needs leadership committed to neurodiversity that actively promotes inclusion at all levels of the organisation. This commitment should be reflected in company policies, practices and culture. The question is, is India increasingly serious about setting global benchmarks?

Muneer is co-founder, Medici Institute for Innovation, and Dey is assistant professor, Institute of Management Technology, Hyderabad



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Living Wisely

SWAMI SUKHABODHANANDA

Friedrich Nietzsche said 'live dangerously'; should a youth practice such a teaching? We should 'live wisely' instead of 'live dangerously'. To live wisely includes living dangerously when needed but also includes many other aspects. In life there are moments when you don't have to live dangerously, and at those moments rejoice and be content with the moment. One has to learn that art.

They are moments you have to push yourself beyond your limits, and at that moment you have to live dangerously, meaning, you put yourself at risk.

Why do you say that we have to go beyond our limits? Our different mind creates certain limits, and we get limited by them. Be cautious of this fact. When we have a poor self-esteem, then we set poor goals that appear reasonable. These limits imprison us. Hence the expression, 'Learn to be unreasonable'. This means go beyond the limits of your reason that has been polluted by poor self-esteem. All powerful people are unreasonable — not that they are unintelligent, but they are the ones who have gone beyond the limits of a diffident mind.

We think wrongly and then blame the past failure. We should be neither past-oriented, nor future-oriented, nor even present-oriented. We should have a balance of the past, present and future, but live in the present.



ROLLING ON SATURDAY

## 'New World' Alert

When Nasa was preparing for the Apollo mission, some of the training of the astronauts took place on a Navajo reservation. One day, a Navajo elder and his son were herding sheep and came across the space crew. The old man, who spoke only Navajo, asked a question that his son translated: 'What are these guys in the big suits doing?'

A member of the crew said they were practising for their trip to the moon. The old man got all excited and asked if he could send a message to the moon with the astronauts. Recognising a promotional opportunity, the Nasa folks found a tape recorder.

After the old man recorded his message, they asked his son to translate it. He refused. The Nasa PR people brought the tape to the reservation, where the rest of the tribe listened and laughed, but refused to translate the elder's message.

Finally, the Nasa crew called in an official government translator. His translation of the old man's message was, 'Watch out for these guys; they have come to steal your land.'

## Repeat Task

Knock, knock. Who's there? Déja. Déja who? Knock, knock.

# Mountain-Making Out Of Molehills by Police

Minor offences are, by their very definition, minor offences. But the knack of our law-and-order authorities frequently making a mountain out of a molehill seems to be a feature that goes with the police's other frequent shortcoming: making a molehill out of a mountain — that is, not taking serious crimes committed seriously. Take the arrests of youngsters in Bihar and the separate questioning of a bunch of boys in Gujarat last month ostensibly for waving Palestinian flags ahead of a Muharram procession. The charge? 'Attempting to disturb communal peace.' Talk about the dangers of police straitjacket profiling.

The arrests and questionings were made not on the basis of threat perceptions but solely on a complaint against the video recording of the flag-waving. Supporting an 'international cause' by waving a Palestinian flag isn't even a 'minor offence'. No discord was fomented. But the police — themselves stating that the 'boys had no idea of the conflict in faraway Gaza' — overreacted against yet another set of 'soft targets' engaged in a 'trending' activity for many young people across the world.

Old-fashioned ideas of community policing and neighbourhood engagement makes sense. The police, across states, need to be more connected with the communities that they serve. It helps reduce antagonism between law enforcement and civil society, the two speak the same language, helps nip criminals in the bud, and provides young people with a safe space to blow some steam and engage in perfectly legit activities.



JUST IN JEST

To keep everyone guessing can take on an art form in politics

# The Mysterious Mr Devesh C Thakur

Politicians love kite-flying. And most of them are darn good at it, too. It's a skill they develop early in their long, never-ending careers to understand which way the wind is blowing and, if need be, quickly adapt to the new political climate. Earlier this week, Devesh Chandra Thakur, JD(U) MP from Sitamarhi, sent a thought balloon drifting over the blue skies of Vaishali, hinting at a small meeting that the RJD candidate hadn't been his only opponent in the recent Lok Sabha elections. He wasn't sure if some of his own party members and alliance partners in BJP were secretly sharpening their knives. In other words, it's The World vs Devesh Chandra Thakur. According to Devesh Chandra Thakur:

While his supporters got busy decoding his cryptic message, the 71-year-old ex-party spokesperson added that his electoral victory was all thanks to his personal relationship, work and reputation with voters for the last 25 years. And, then — and here's the twist — Thakur gave a shout-out to Lal Prasad Yadav, yes, the RJD patriarch of auricular hypertrichosis fame, for helping him win his first MLC poll in 2002! Cat plonked among pigeons, Thakur's political messaging, in one stroke, has kept his supporters happy, his seat warm, and his boss — who knows a thing or two about airing grievances at opportune moments — guessing. Politics 101.

# Income Disparity Feeds Corruption?



Nidhi Kaicker, Veena S Kulkarni & Raghav Gaiha

Based on the Gallup World Poll Survey for India (2019-23) CMIE Consumer Pyramids Household Survey, income inequality breeds corruption — in both business and government. Once rich, not only is there a strong temptation to become richer, it's also easier (through share market manipulation, political lobbying, etc). Indeed, when people are exposed to highly unequal social contexts, their overall concerns about moral implications of corruption diminish.

Corruption is defined as use of public office for private gain. But this definition leaves out corruption within businesses (e.g., insider trading). So, a more comprehensive definition is use of public resources by executives in both public and private sectors for private gain — without discounting the role of politicians.

Corruption has risen following globalisation, as natural resources

have become more valuable, and regulatory agencies licensing their allocation more subservient to powerful business interests and public officials. There has been a spectacular spike in income and wealth inequality since 2014. Share of the top 1% in total income in 2022-23 is at its historical highest. The top 1% of income-earners made 22.6% of total pre-tax income, while the bottom half (50% of adults) earns only 15% of the total national income.

Ratio of the share of top 1% of earners to that of the bottom 50% in total income is the [Thomas] Piketty measure' of income inequality. This has risen. But our estimates of the 'Piketty measure' based on GWP surveys reveals a mixed pattern over 2019-23. It spiked in 2020, fell in 2021, rising in 2022, and falling in 2023.

Corruption, based on GWP surveys, shows a rise in its distinct but overlapping manifestations. These estimates are based on perceptions of respondents in these surveys. Respondents answering yes to whether corruption is widespread are added up to arrive at a measure of corruption. So, a statement that corruption has risen essentially means that a higher proportion of respondents perceive that corruption is more widespread.

Proportion of respondents who agree that corruption was widespread



Water made to seek another level

within businesses was high, rising from 77.7% in 2019 to 79% in 2023. Within government, it rose from 72.18% in 2019 to 75.05% in 2023. The intersection between government and businesses was not just high but rose from 65.15% in 2019 to 69.40% in 2023.

So, was income inequality responsible for the rise in corruption? And was the judiciary effective in curbing it?

Emphasising that it was fuelled by speculation in the financial and real estate markets, income inequality contributed significantly to corruption in all its manifestations, while a well-functioning judiciary was associated with a significant reduction. Benefits of education — both higher secondary and above — are unambiguous, as it's associated with lower income inequality but higher perception of corruption.

This is hardly surprising, as higher educational attainments expand remunerative employment opportunities and impart the ability to benefit

from them. But the fact that they perceive higher corruption may be explained by their being better informed about insider trading, graft in government, bribery of public officials, lobbying by big businesses, etc.

Efficiency costs of corruption are severe — corruption decreases business activity, raises marginal costs of public funds and hampers growth. But the equity-efficiency trade-off of progressive taxation is often exaggerated. For example, when there is information asymmetry between a creditor and a borrower, the rich borrower may get the loan even when the project is less efficient than that of a borrower without collateral. Besides, in a federal structure such as India's, Centre-state grants are driven more by political compulsions than by efficiency considerations.

In her latest budget, the FM missed the opportunity to raise taxes on the rich. Higher revenues would have enabled health and education reforms towards a more prosperous India, more aware and more antipathetic to corruption.

Kaicker is assistant professor, Ambedkar University, Delhi. Kulkarni is associate professor, Arkansas State University, US, and Gaiha is research affiliate, Population Aging Research Centre, University of Pennsylvania, US

# When Temptation Turns Into Con



Kiran Somvanshi

India's consumption economy needs the instant gratification driver as its legs to grow. We have instant loans available in a few clicks, quick commerce ensuring delivery within minutes, derivatives trading with the lure of fast money, online games promising instant wins, and home delivery of almost anything, including liquor in some states and to be available in others soon. Speedy wish fulfillment has emerged as a viable business model.

A spate of new-age companies is catering to the desire fulfilment of young consumers. Products are marketed to make them appealing. In their 2013 book, Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products, Nir Eyal with Ryan Hoover provide insight into how products are designed to create instant gratification, and psychological effects on users, particularly the young.

Consumption is no longer only about its own sake any more. It's also to build perception and boost image. Thanks to social media, ostentatious consumption — at times beyond the means of the average consumer — is conspicuous, visible and widely

publicised. In his 2017 book, Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked, Adam Alter highlights how technology and social media are designed to be addictive, leading to instant gratification. He also points to its negative impact, especially on younger generations.

Incidentally, the youth who don't have enough money to qualify to be consumers aren't necessarily a constraint for companies. 'Buy now and pay later' arrangements have been made feasible. The flip side to this kind of credit-fuelled consumption is the running up of debt, or inability to repay loans. This has become one of the worst-kept secrets of the gratification economy.

Given a free-market scenario, most regulators can hardly do anything except warn. For instance, Sebi chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch recently warned of young people losing money while



Not just hardselling any apple product

trading in F&O. The Economic Survey 2024 says, 'Social media, screen time, sedentary habits, and unhealthy food are a lethal mix that can undermine public health and productivity and diminish India's economic potential.' The private sector's contribution to this toxic mix of habits is substantial, and that is myopic.'

Some measures have been taken to regulate this:

**Ban on dark patterns** In 2023, Central Consumer Protection Authority banned e-commerce and online platforms from using dark patterns. These deceptive practices manipulate customers into buying products they don't intend to, or lure them into buying a more expensive alternative to what they want to buy.

**Hike in STT rates** To control speculative interest in F&O trading, the budget increased the securities transaction tax (STT) rate on futures and options to 0.02% and 0.1%, respectively. Nevertheless, it's largely the 'buyer beware' principle at play. But it's difficult for buyers to be wary if they are young, inexperienced, have easy access to money and live in a hyper-connected world of social media that only amplifies peer pressure. It takes conscious effort and training in

mindfulness, understanding of personal finance and consumer behaviour; parental guidance and positive reinforcement from the ecosystem to dodge the negative effects of instant gratification. Not all young people are necessarily able to overcome or confront their Fomo and course-correct themselves.

One may argue that the state cannot be over-protective of its young citizenry. But it's increasingly difficult for the young to decipher risks. For instance, many online 'likes' for a product are perceived to be a sign of its popularity. Is there a way for young consumers to know if the 'likes' or positive reviews are part of the company's promotion strategy? Our young consumers should know.

Does this absolve companies? Not really. Principles of business sustainability and responsible marketing demand that companies making products and services targeted at the youth be conscious of the long-term ramifications of their actions. It is possible to create products and services that add value to young consumers without exploiting their desire for instant gratification.

It may not be as remunerative in the short term, but would create sustainable value over the longer term. The young are the golden goose of India's consumption economy. Let growth avarice not destroy this golden goose.

kiran.somvanshi@timesofindia.com

## Chat Room

### Let's Clean Up the Western Ghetto

Apropos the Edit, 'Wayanad, How Much Do We Really Care?' (Aug 2), as usual, the heavy toll in terms of fatalities, livelihood and property will eventually remain confined to the affected families and slide into oblivion. The remaining rubble and mud will be figuratively slung around by rival politicians in a bid to establish blame and score political brownie points. The century-old Mullaperiyar Dam in Idukki district, being in an earthquake-prone zone, is another disaster waiting to happen. Wayanad is an eye opener to the imperative of evicting people from fragile ecological zones, including the surrounding belt of Mullaperiyar, and rehabilitating them in safer locations by remuneratively engaging them in labour-intensive activities. All 6 Western Ghat states should pool resources to set up methanol plants at scale, aimed at generating employment, economic benefits and environmental conservation.

GRJAGOPALAN NAIR Kochi

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

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