

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Yunus steps in

Restoring normalcy must be primary task

THE 84-year-old Nobel laureate's popularity in Bangladesh is undeniable, yet Muhammad Yunus faces a formidable task in bringing stability to a nation in turmoil. Appointed head of the interim government following the dramatic ouster of long-time Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the economist's global acclaim and non-political background make him a unique choice. He has, in recent weeks, warned about the serious regional implications if the unrest continues. The immediate goals before him are crystal clear — restoration of normalcy, ensuring law and order and protection of the vulnerable groups, including the minorities. On test would be Yunus' ability to assert his mortal authority and effectively channel the respect he commands to put an end to the anarchy.

The student movement that triggered Hasina's fall labelled her an authoritarian whose administration was firm in its crackdown on political dissent. New Delhi's attention would be focused on the vision for Bangladesh the interim government advocates, and the leverage Yunus is permitted to emerge as a constructive transition leader. His leadership in the coming days could well determine the course Bangladeshi politics takes in the proclaimed endeavour of a fresh start. Hopes of free and fair elections with reforms of institutions that can hold the leaders accountable would be pitted against the possibility of politics of vendetta and a throwback to a dominant role for extremist elements, with military backing.

During Hasina's tenure, Yunus faced more than 100 lawsuits, which he termed fake. The student leaders insisted on having him as the guiding light. It's a daunting responsibility, with little scope for any false move. India's grave concerns are not limited to the security and wellbeing of its nationals and the minorities in Bangladesh. The consequences of prolonged instability are far too many.

Tenacious leader

Buddhadeb dreamt of a progressive Bengal

THE death of Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the last Marxist Chief Minister of West Bengal, on Thursday marks the end of an era for West Bengal's political and cultural landscape. He was known for his intellectual rigour, literary acumen and a deep commitment to the ideals of socialism. He joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1966, rising through the ranks with a quiet determination that would come to define his political career. Bhattacharjee took over the reins of West Bengal in 2000, succeeding the legendary Jyoti Basu, and served as CM till 2011 when Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress won, ending the Communists' rule spanning 34 years.

Bhattacharjee's life was a testament to the transformative power of conviction. He was seen as a bridge between the ideological rigidity of his party and the pragmatic demands of governance. His dedication to the cause of the Left Front was unwavering, earning him respect across the political spectrum. Bhattacharjee's tenure was characterised by his efforts to modernise West Bengal's economy, a move that was both bold and controversial. His Singur and Nandigram land acquisition initiatives aimed to attract industrial investment, sparking widespread protests that became defining moments of his regime. Despite the controversies, his vision for a more prosperous West Bengal was clear and his efforts laid the groundwork for future development.

Beyond his political endeavours, Bhattacharjee was known for his love of literature and music, reflecting a deep appreciation for the cultural tapestry of Bengal. His simplicity and accessibility endeared him to the people, making him a leader who was both respected and loved. His legacy is a reminder of the complexities of governance and the enduring impact of steadfast leadership. His personal beliefs and principles are best demonstrated by his pledge that his body be donated to a government hospital for research.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, AUGUST 9, 1924

The police and the people

LORD Lytton has been freely complimented in a section of the Anglo-Indian Press for expressing himself in somewhat strong terms at a Police Parade recently held at Dacca on the subject of the relations between the police and the people. In reality, the views he expressed are nothing but commonplace. "The police," said His Excellency, "are more important than any other servants of the state; they are the pillars of society, the guardians of the peace, the prefects of the people. A contented police is the best guarantee of the security of the government; a trusted police is the best test of the unity of the people." Again, "one thing must always be remembered. The police of every country are what the people make them. They cannot possess the qualities which are essential unless the public attribute those qualities to them, support and trust those who possess them and help the government to eradicate those who are deficient in them. If the police in England are perhaps the most efficient in the world, it is because the English people have made them so. It is because the people themselves value discipline and respect authority. If the burly Metropolitan constable in his blue uniform is universally regarded as a friendly protector and as an inexhaustive mine of information, it is because every law-abiding citizen, from the little child who has to be steered through the traffic to the owner of millions, trusts him implicitly with his life and property and accepts his authority without question."

Adding caste to creed deepens disunity

That feeling of being Indian, first and foremost, is sadly being eroded



TRYSTS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

NOW that Rahul Gandhi has decided to become a full-time politician, he can pose a challenge to Narendra Modi's leadership. His choice of caste politics to combat the communal politics of Modi and the Sangh Parivar is, to my mind, a dangerous one. To add casteism to the two main evils that the country faces — communalism and corruption — will prevent our country from progressing, and is certainly a dangerous move.

As endemic corruption weakens the moral fibre, communalism and casteism militate against unity that is essential to make India stand up as one against poverty, illiteracy and the feudal mentality that presently pervades the national psyche.

Religious and caste identities are not going to disappear in the foreseeable future. It is a fact of life in India, been there for centuries. In rural India, where more than half of our people live, caste is a factor of daily existence. In urban India, where interaction is perforce impersonal, caste and even religious identity was slowly losing its relevance.

I live in a building that boasts of 20 flat owners belonging to different religions (Hindu, Muslim and Christian); different castes (brahmins, SCs and OBCs, rajputs, khatris, kayasthas). They hail from different states of India — Maharashtra, Punjab, UP, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Gujarat and Goa. All of us get along famously with each other, eat together once a year on the terrace of the building and settle quarrels among the grandchild-



DANGEROUS: Rahul's caste politics to combat Modi's communal politics will prevent India from progressing. P11

dren by asking them to settle their quarrels themselves. You may have guessed it right — we are all educated, middle-income citizens. So, we have a headstart on integration.

In 1981, I was a guest of the Japanese government, attending a seven-week workshop on the judicial process system in Asia. The other participants were from the US, Australia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Samoa, Malaysia, Singapore and the host country, Japan. On one Sunday in Tokyo, I went to a church, accompanied by the Australian, who was a judge, and the Samoan, who was a police chief. Returning to our hostel after the Service, I noticed a couple who was obviously Indians walking on the other side of the road. I waved to them. They waved back. My companions asked me if I knew them. I replied I did not. Then, why I had greeted them, they asked. It surprised them when I said that I identified with them at once as not many of my countrymen could afford to be travelling in an affluent foreign land.

That feeling of being Indian, first and foremost, is sadly being eroded. First, it was the Hindu-Muslim divide accentuated at the time of elections and now, this

The attempt by Opposition parties to further divide the majority Hindus on the basis of caste for electoral gain is going to end in disaster.

attempt by Opposition parties to further divide the majority Hindus on the basis of caste for electoral gain. That is going to end in disaster, like the division on religious grounds is leading us to.

If dividing and weakening India on religious and caste lines was not enough, the Supreme Court, in a six-to-one decision of a seven-judge Constitution Bench, overturned its own 2004 ruling that had pronounced that all SCs constitute one homogeneous body. By that ruling, the more educated units of SCs, like the Mahars in Maharash-

tra or the Chamars in Punjab, cornered most of the reserved seats allotted to the Scheduled Castes, leaving the less educated bereft of the benefits that reservation promised.

The 2024 Supreme Court majority verdict, of which the CJI was a part, argued that the categories of SCs who had not benefited from reservation should now be treated separately so that the principle on which reservation was conceived was upheld. This judgment will further divide Indian citizens and produce demands for inclusion from sub-castes whose existence itself was not known to most citizens.

Five years ago, just before Covid struck, I broke the neck of my femur bone after a fall in the bath. The result was that I needed a young man, full time, to help me with my daily physical chores. He was a Dalit from Bihar, but just before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, I learnt he was a "maha Dalit", a category that I was not aware of. There could be such neglected elements in Maharashtra also.

Be that as it may, the presence of these dispossessed sub-castes of SCs, obviously quite numerous in the north of the country, has been noted by the Supreme Court. The court has rightly deigned that they, too, should be given a part of the reservation

pie. The enforcement of the court's order is not going to be easy. More difficult will be to calculate the political fallout of this further divide in the polity.

Last Saturday, the KES (Kandivali Education Society) College of Law in Mumbai invited me to interact with their students online. I answered a volley of questions shot at me by the students. Many of them concerned reservations in college admissions and jobs with the government. I explained the rationale behind affirmative action but was at a loss to justify the heady mix of rectifying centuries-old injustices with the necessity of maintaining higher standards of service, which the common man was entitled to.

Both factors need to be kept in mind by the decision-makers while formulating a "via media". Political parties, starting with the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru right up to the BJP under Narendra Modi, have neglected education and health, the bedrocks of a successful society. China has stolen a 50-year march over us in ensuring 100 per cent literacy, as now exists in the advanced countries of the West.

If we had achieved total literacy, we could have selected the really bright boys and girls from the neglected castes and enrolled them at the State's expense in the best schools to ensure that they could compete with their sisters and brothers of the advanced castes on an even plane. The problem of admitting a candidate who achieved rank 821 in the civil services exam into the IAS would not have arisen, as it did in the recent case of Puja Khedkar.

Recently, Rahul Gandhi predicted an ED raid on his premises for criticising the government for some action it had taken. He need not lose sleep over such an arrest. It will boomerang on the government — it will increase his slowly rising popularity, accelerate it a bit. But if the ED conjures up a case for a raid because of his raking up the caste issue, I, for one, will not defend him.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The caste system is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. — BR Ambedkar

The temple remains in memory now

TANYA VERMA

A year has passed, yet the tragedy at Summer Hill's Shiv temple, also known as Shiv Bavdi, continues to haunt many. I vividly recall the dreadful morning when the news of a devastating landslide near the Shiv temple in Shimla flashed across my television screen, leaving everyone at home stunned. The sight was indeed difficult to believe, especially since this place holds deep significance for me and my family.

As I reminisce about my childhood, it brings a wave of nostalgia and transports me back to a time of boundless joy when I used to visit Summer Hill to live with my grandparents during the summer vacation. My grandfather, a retired professor from Himachal Pradesh University, and my grandmother, a teacher at a nearby school, made each one of our summer vacations unforgettable. My grandparents' home was always filled with their warmth, besides the aroma of freshly cooked food they used to make for us.

One of our favourite outings was to The Mall, where my grandfather would treat me to delicious pastries and other delights from the renowned Trishool Bakeries. There was a unique joy in exploring the local market in the daytime and walking around the Summer Hill railway station, waiting for the Kalka-Shimla toy train to come. The sound of the train chugging in and out, the whistle blowing and the chatter of passengers — they were all so familiar and comforting.

Each morning, my mother and I would stroll to the Shiv temple, a mere three kilometres from our home, encountering monkeys and langurs along the way. The Shiv Mandir holds a deep cultural significance, drawing devotees and natives from across the state. It used to witness a huge rush during the month of *saawan* as several religious activities, including *havans* and *bhandaras*, were organised by the local authorities. Surrounded by lush greenery and towering trees, the temple exuded a serene and divine beauty that offered immense peace even as the melodic tinkling of temple bells, the chirping of birds and the soothing sound of flowing water near the peepal tree across the road added to its charm.

The temple does not stand there anymore. It got washed away in the massive landslide last year that ravaged not only the structure, but also our profound memories. I wish I could relive those delightful moments of childhood.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

So close, yet so far

With reference to the article 'Vinesh ruled out by a hundred grams', India's wrestling community shares the anguish of its champion, Vinesh Phogat. The Olympic Games are a platform for athletes to crystallise their dreams into medals. Vinesh, too, was one such athlete. Sadly, even though she seemed poised for glory, she stumbled at the weigh-in, as she was found to be a few grams above the 50-kg limit. What makes it all the more heartbreaking is that she was close to clinching gold. Phogat's journey to the final, marked by her triumph over reigning world champion Yui Susaki, was nothing short of heroic. Besides, her desperate struggle to shed those extra grams by working out the whole night is a testament to the willingness of countless athletes to make huge sacrifices for their dreams.

SAHIPPREET SINGH, BY MAIL

Vinesh's resilience shone through

Apropos of the editorial 'Winner Vinesh'; the disqualification of the ace Indian wrestler from the 50-kg category because she was overweight by over 100 grams is heartbreaking. Her journey, marked by triumph over world champions and a historic march to the finals, has inspired millions. This setback underscores the grueling and often dangerous demands athletes face in maintaining their weight based on the requirements of the games. While the loss stings, it does not diminish her achievements. Phogat's resilience, from taking on those at the helm of the governing body of wrestling in India to nearly clinching an Olympic gold, demonstrates her indomitable spirit. She remains a beacon of hope and strength for aspiring athletes across the nation.

AMANJOT KAUR, MOHALI

Net loss for India

With reference to the front-page news report 'Unphogatable agony'; it was shocking to hear from Union Minister for Youth Affairs and Sports Mansukh Mandaviya that the government had spent over a staggering Rs 74 lakh to provide the female grappler with the necessary help and support in her preparations for the Games. Her disqualification from the 50-kg cat-

egory has dashed the hopes of the country for gold. On top of that, Vinesh ended up in hospital after her desperate attempt to shed those extra grams overnight failed.

BHUPINDER KOCHHAR, PANCHKULA

Take her coach, team to task

Apropos of the news report 'Sabotage vs support: Govt, Oppn wrestle it out in Parliament'; the episode will go down as one of the greatest fiascos in India's sporting history. Her disqualification came at a time when India was starving for success at the Games. It is unfortunate that Phogat had successfully navigated the tournament to reach the finals, only to be ruled out of it for being overweight by a hundred grams. This raises questions about the shortcomings of her support staff. The wrestler's coach, nutritionist and members of her team must be held accountable for the debacle.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

Probe Vinesh's weight gain

Refer to the article 'Vinesh ruled out by a hundred grams'; the Wrestling Federation of India has pinned the blame for the grappler's disqualification on her support staff. There is a need to conduct a thorough probe into the matter. It is not like Vinesh did not do her diligence to lose the extra grams; she worked out the entire night to shed weight before the final, but to no avail. The reason behind her weight gain needs to be ascertained. Accountability must be fixed.

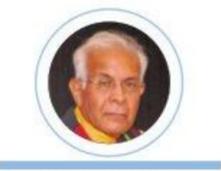
RAMANDEEP, BY MAIL

Instability in Bangladesh

With reference to the article 'This is not the Bangladesh westwood for in the line of fire'; Hasina's ouster marks the beginning of a new chapter in the country's history. Her downfall came as a surprise only to those who had failed to see the writing on the wall. As Hasina transformed from a democrat into a dictator, she sparked an uprising that would eventually result in her flight. Instability in Bangladesh is a matter of concern for India. It remains to be seen if the people of the neighbouring country will embrace the newly formed interim government. New Delhi will be keeping tabs on its neighbourhood.

LAL SINGH, AMRITSAR

Despite anger & alienation, newfound hope in J&K



WAJAHAT HABIBULLAH
FORMER BUREAUCRAT, J&K CADRE

THE pledge by Sheikh Abdullah at Srinagar's Lal Chowk on the accession to India of the then princely state of Jammu and Kashmir had the words of the great Indian poet Amir Khusrau: "Mun tu shudam tu mun shudi; mun tun shudam tu jaan shudi." (I have become you, and you me. I, the body; You, the soul.)

But today, we have to ask ourselves the questions that Abdullah had posed on the eve of the 1975 Indira-Sheikh Accord: "Do you honestly feel that the foundations of democracy and secularism are more stable than before? Can you honestly dare say that the shackles of distrust between Kashmiris and India are broken? Have the people here (Kashmir) got the clean administration which they have long yearned for? Were they freed from the morass of unemployment and poverty?"

This was a Kashmir-centric questionnaire, but reading down Article 370 of the Constitution, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had promised in the Rajya Sabha debate on the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill, 2019, an end to corruption in all of J&K,

including Ladakh. "In fact," wrote Raja Muzaffar Bhatt, a Kashmiri campaigner for civil rights, within a year. "It often appears that misgovernance, nepotism and corruption have become the rule of law in government offices during the last one year." Now, he tells me the situation is even worse.

The Forum for Human Rights, formed by eminent citizens from across the country, said in its annual report that counter-insurgency, in taking overriding priority, had vitiated the rule of law, causing widespread post-traumatic stress disorder even among children.

Every sector of commerce and industry, including the fabled handicraft industry, has been beset by massive losses. Local crafts have been substituted with cheap imitations fabricated in Amritsar and found to be more profitable even by Kashmiri entrepreneurs.

Tourism is, indeed, booming. Yes, the hotel industry in Srinagar, Gulmarg and Pahalgam has been prospering. But is the Kashmiri benefiting? The hotels are now staffed mostly with non-Kashmiris; even the menus and decor are reminiscent of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Has Kashmir got nothing to offer in either? And every hotel in Gulmarg faces expropriation on the lapse of a leasehold, with entrepreneurs in Gujarat being canvassed by the Union Government to invest in this lucrative industry.

The streets of Srinagar, including the bundh along



OPTIMISTIC: Kashmir saw a big voter turnout during the Lok Sabha elections held this year. PH

the Jhelum and the boulevard skirting the Dal Lake, have seen frenetic activity in widening pavements and cycling tracks. The contractors were mostly from Gujarat. Who benefits? Even the labourers are mostly migrants. The roads are usually jammed with traffic, but there are no strollers on the broad pavements of the bundh or the boulevard, where I have gone walking several times without encountering a single tourist.

Domicile rules introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the J&K administration have killed local employment. The Directorate of Information and Public Relations, in coordination with security agencies, has choked the media.

And the result? An acceleration of terrorist activity,

Domicile rules introduced by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the J&K administration have killed local employment.

now primarily across the Pir Panjal in Jammu division, from Poonch in the west to Kathua in the east, and also in north and south Kashmir (areas where the government had boasted of a cessation of militancy), targeting the defence forces.

But the essence of Abdullah's questions and the avowed objective of the abrogation were on securing the foundations of democracy. I recount my meeting at the Tsawalgam Rest House in Kulgam in March 2021 with all 20 members of the then newly elected District Development Council (DDC), representing the CPI(M), People's Democratic Party, National Conference (NC) and Indian National Congress. The chairman was Mohammed Afzal Parray of the CPI(M) and the vice-

chair Shazia of the NC. It may be recalled that Kulgam is the subject of a recent cryptic tweet by the Chinar Corps: "On specific inputs regarding presence of terrorists on higher reaches of Halan in Kulgam, operations launched by Security Forces on 04 Aug 23. In exchange of firing with terrorists, three (army) personnel sustained injuries and later succumbed."

Chairman Parray began by stating that what happened on August 5 was wrong ('Theeknahinhua'). Life had been taken from Kashmir. With no new development initiative since the elections, he could see no way forward and no way back. "What should we do?" he asked.

The councillors were stopped by security personnel from meeting members of the public. They could offer nothing to the youth, except the prospect of jail. Many youths had been arrested. Many of them remained untraced. The councillors had no assistance in ascertaining their whereabouts.

There was a litany of complaints from many parties about the ineffectiveness of the institution of the DDC, which could do nothing for the people. Officials avoided meeting the councillors. At times, their own families shunned them for being informers. The councillors were humiliated by officials over facilities like transport and security, which, they had been assured, would be provided by the police control room (PCR). The complaint

was that even the PSOs provided to the councillors were spies reporting to the PCR on their activities. Rajesh Kumar Bhatt, who had been a migrant, had returned to Kulgam in 1995. He enjoyed the confidence of his colleagues in the DDC and conducted the proceedings with professional efficiency.

On our way to Srinagar, we made a stop at Seerat Jagir village, which falls within the jurisdiction of the DDC. Among the villagers present were retired government officials and teachers, shopkeepers, farmers and a number of young men, but no women. They described, in the presence of chairman Parray and other councillors, their disillusion with the DDC, even though they had turned out to vote in good numbers.

The J&K Lieutenant Governor, at a meeting held with the chairmen of DDCs at the Raj Bhawan in Jammu after the polls, reportedly claimed that the three-tier panchayat raj system had been established to empower grassroots democracy.

The recent Lok Sabha elections were held in J&K in five phases. Srinagar recorded its highest voter turnout since 1996.

It shows that despite the alienation, there is a growing realisation about the possibility that the democratic process — and not the gun — could be the panacea. Despite the simmering anger with the current political leadership, there is newfound hope. Are we ready to see it?

The Akali Dal crisis is more than just a political one



CHANDER SUTA DOGRA
SENIOR JOURNALIST

ALL of a sudden, the Akal Takht — the supreme temporal seat of Sikhism — has become a refuge for top leaders of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), desperate to claw back into favour with the Sikh masses after a series of electoral defeats. They are flocking for forgiveness to the very institution whose loss of prestige they are being held responsible for. Can the Akal Takht free itself from the overriding influence of the SAD and take a decision that is seen as impartial and has the approval of the Sikh community?

Last month, a rebel group of senior Akali politicians created a flutter when it listed some 'anti-Panth' activities of SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal and sought his ouster. The group presented the alleged 'crimes' in a letter to the Akal Takht Jathedar, Giani Raghbir Singh. The group members also admitted to

religious and political lapses made by them while they were part of the SAD governments between 2007 and 2017 and sought atonement for them. In other words, they admitted to being party to the same wrongs.

Just a few days later, Sukhbir also went to the Akal Takht and apologised in writing for the lapses during the party's 10-year rule. His letter of apology, in which he took responsibility for his actions, was made public on Monday. The SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee), the apex body controlling Sikh gurdwaras, has also submitted an apology.

The apologies centre around four major issues that have been riling the Sikh community for several years. The first is related to the 2007 blasphemy case against Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh for impersonating Guru Gobind Singh. The case was later quietly withdrawn. The second pertains to the alleged manipulation of an apology issued by the dera for impersonating the Guru. Ram Rahim was pardoned by the Akal Takht in September 2015. But as he continued to face anger and protests from the community, the pardon was revoked less than a month later.



SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS: A decay set in during the Badal era, when the spiritual authority of the Sikh institutions like the SGPC and the Akal Takht became subservient to the SAD. TRIBUNE PHOTO

The SGPC, controlled by the SAD, reportedly spent Rs 90 lakh on advertisements to defend the decision to pardon the dera head. Akali leaders now openly accuse Sukhbir of pressuring the then Akal Takht Jathedar to pardon Ram Rahim. Worse, when three sacrilege incidents concerning the holy bairs of the Guru Granth Sahib occurred in 2015, the alleged perpetrators, belonging to the dera, were not prosecuted.

More recent revelations claim that Sukhbir secretly met the dera chief in Jaipur and Delhi in 2017 to mobilise electoral support. This was

Though one can never write off a politician, this does seem like the beginning of the end of the Badal era.

in defiance of a 2007 Akal Takht edict forbidding Sikhs to have any ties with Ram Rahim. More evidence of the betrayal of 'Sikh' by the leadership of a party of the Sikhs was a body blow to Sukhbir's political persona.

In the midst of this, nine top rebel leaders were expelled from the party when they launched the 'Shiromani Akali Dal Sudhar Lehar' (reform movement) to "strengthen and uplift" the party. But this is just the political aspect of the ongoing crisis.

To restore the spiritual dominance of 'Sikh' in the

fabric of the SAD is the other goal, which is more challenging. Punjabis are watching this unprecedented churn in the Sikh domain with a sense of hope that things will change for the better. The sentiment calls for a return to the core religious values that were allegedly abandoned by the Akali Dal during the Badals' regimes in pursuit of electoral gains.

Since its inception in 1920, the Akali Dal has championed the aspirations of the Sikh community, fashioning its politics around the Sikh concept of Miri Piri, which prioritises spiritual or religious authority over political power. The decay set in during the Badal era, when the spiritual authority of Sikh institutions like the SGPC and the Akal Takht became subservient to the party. These revered institutions began to be used as instruments to further the political prospects of the Akali party, and they gradually lost their importance as robust religious institutions that were meant to guide the Sikh Panth. The stranglehold of the Badal family over the party and such institutions began to be resented within the party and outside, though none spoke openly about this till the time Parkash Singh Badal was alive.

If today the Sikh Panth is rejecting Sukhbir's politics and, by extension, that of his father, it is because of the set-

ting in of a deep revulsion over the blatant misuse of Sikh religious institutions. Ten of the party's 13 Lok Sabha candidates lost their security deposits in the General Election held earlier this year, taking the party to rock bottom. Its vote share is down to 13.4 per cent, even lower than that of its one-time junior partner, the BJP, which now stands at 18.5 per cent. The situation was equally bad in the 2022 Assembly elections, when the party won only three seats.

But nobody wants to see the demise of the SAD. Not even its enemies. Because Punjab needs a strong Akali Dal to balance its delicate politics and social harmony. For long, the party was the voice of the Sikhs and exerted a moderating influence on the community. Today, as it flounders and the Sikhs find themselves rudderless in the state's changing polity, radical elements like Amritpal Singh have emerged.

The Badal camp has described the rebels' actions as a conspiracy hatched by its political opponents, the BJP and AAP. But given the adverse baggage accumulated by Sukhbir, it is hard to see him winning back the trust of the Sikhs and Punjabis in the near future. Though one can never write off a politician, this does seem like the beginning of the end of the Badal era.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8						9
10	11	12				
14		13		15		
17				16		18
21		22		20		19
24				23		25

ACROSS

- Nervous breakdown (5-2)
- Large narrow piece (5)
- Dissuade from (4,3,2)
- Wounding remark (3)
- Owl's cry (4)
- Hoey (8)
- Magnitude (6)
- Persuasive (6)
- Make a general disclosure (2,6)
- Prefix meaning principal (4)
- Timber used in shipbuilding (3)
- Freedom and scope (9)
- Cheery in temperament (5)
- An intellectual (7)

DOWN

- Seize after pursuit (5)
- Be unwell (3)
- Problem (4)
- Quality that evokes pity (6)
- Sentimental weakness (4,4)
- Teller of anecdotes (9)
- Forbearing (7)
- Candid (9)
- Affected social superiority (8)
- Absorb attention of (7)
- Feasible (6)
- Warm and damp (5)
- Burglar's haul (4)
- Single (3)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Reticent, 5 Plod, 9 First, 10 Copious, 11 Sound as a bell, 13 Astute, 14 Overdo, 17 Otherworldly, 20 Adviser, 21 Match, 22 Each, 23 Crusader.

Down: 1 Rife, 2 Turn out, 3 Cut and thrust, 4 Nectar, 6 Loose, 7 Disallow, 8 Speak volumes, 12 Sabotage, 15 Related, 16 Horror, 18 Havoc, 19 Char.

SU DO KU

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

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

AUGUST 9, 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Shravan Shaka 18
- Shravan Parvishite 25
- Hijari 1446
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 5, up to 3.15 am
- Siddha Yoga up to 1.45 pm
- Hast Nakshatra up to 2.45 am
- Moon in Virgo sign
- Naag - Panchmi

FORECAST

CITY	FRIDAY		SATURDAY	
	MAX	MIN	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	33	28		
New Delhi	34	25		
Amritsar	35	28		
Bathinda	35	26		
Jalandhar	35	27		
Ludhiana	35	27		
Bhiani	33	26		
Hisar	34	26		
Sirsa	35	29		
Dharamsala	24	19		
Manali	25	17		
Shimla	24	17		
Srinagar	33	20		
Jammu	32	24		
Kargil	32	20		
Leh	30	14		
Dehradun	32	24		
Mussoorie	23	18		

TEMPERATURE IN °C



A pragmatic Marxist

If Marxists committed — in the words of their veteran leader Jyoti Basu — a “historic blunder” in the mid-1990s by foregoing an opportunity to lead the United Front government at the Centre, they repeated the mistake years later, owing to their ideological rigidity, when they stalled the efforts of their Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee to woo private investments for industrialisation of West Bengal. Bhattacharjee, the last communist Chief Minister of West Bengal, who died after prolonged illness, was a Marxist with a difference; someone who dared to shed the ideological dogma and embrace private capital for rapid development of his home State. However, his pragmatic policies did not go down well with the party leadership and eventually turned out to be his political nemesis. The CPI(M) stalwart — a quintessential Bengali ‘bhadralok’ with an austere lifestyle and an incorruptible image — will be remembered for the defeat of the 34-year-old Left regime in the State in 2011 at the hands of Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress which rode to power on the crest of anti-land acquisition protests. He goes down in history as a pragmatic communist who was willing to keep aside his ideological convictions and embrace capitalism for the industrialisation of his State. Since taking over as Chief Minister of West Bengal from ageing Jyoti Basu in 2000, Bhattacharjee pursued pro-industry policies, often differing with the party line.

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee dared to shed the ideological dogma and embrace capital for development

His persistent efforts for the industrialisation of Bengal earned him the moniker of ‘Brand Buddha’ from the media to signify his government’s developmental initiatives. The reformist and investor-friendly approach made him popular. It was during his tenure as Chief Minister from 2000-2011 that the State became a preferred investment destination. Within two years of formulating the IT policy in 2003, the sector registered 70 per cent growth. In 2000-01, West Bengal was second only to Gujarat in terms of investment realisation. His biggest initiative was attracting Tata Motors to establish a small car plant at Singur, a fertile agricultural area not far from the city. However, it faced opposition from farmers, a key vote bank of the Left parties, and eventually became one of the key reasons, along with the Nandigram agitation, for the downfall of the Marxist government. Bhattacharjee’s open defiance of the party line on key issues signalled the start of ideological churning in the Marxist party, a process that still continues. The party needs to do candid introspection on the reasons for its steady decline and re-invent itself to stay relevant. A clear disconnect with aspirational middle class, continued peddling of the worn-out Cold War era narrative fuelled solely by anti-Americanism, failure to recognise the role of the private enterprise in wealth creation and distribution, visceral hatred for the corporate world, blind opposition to adoption of new technologies and big ticket projects are some of the factors responsible for the left parties losing relevance over years.



MUHAMMAD YUNUS Head of B'desh interim government

“ We have got independence for the second time. We have to protect this independence... If you have faith in me, ensure that there is no attack anywhere in the country



SHAKTIKANTA DAS RBI Governor

The Monetary Policy Committee may look through high food inflation if it is transitory; but in an environment of persisting high food inflation, as we are experiencing now, it cannot afford to do so



CARLES PUIGDEMONT Ex-Catalonia leader and fugitive

For the last seven years we've been persecuted because we wanted to hear the voice of the Catalan people. They've (Spanish authorities) made being Catalan into something suspicious

India’s geopolitical calculations at SCO meet

It makes more sense to be part of the principle-based trans-regional international organisation than outside it



SHIV BHAGWAN SAHARAN

On July 3-4, the 24th meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Heads of State was chaired by Astana, Kazakhstan, in the backdrop of ongoing conflicts — the Gaza war and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, trust deficits and rising tensions around the world. The Indian delegation, with Modi’s vision of ‘SECURE’ — which stands for Security, Economic development, Connectivity, Unity, Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and Environmental protection — was led by External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr S Jaishankar. Prime Minister Narendra Modi skipped the meeting due to the ongoing first session of the Indian Parliament, as stated officially.

However, experts are unconvincing of this reason, speculating that PM Modi is closer to the United States, even as New Delhi’s engagement in the SCO is seen as a symbol of its strategic autonomy. India’s also multi-aligned policy under Modi’s leadership, in which New Delhi is part of the Quad as well as an engaging member State of the SCO, which is largely dominated by China and Russia, works against the United States’ interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, the United States might have pressured PM Modi to skip the SCO meeting. However, he later visited Russia and Austria from July 8-10.

Evolution of SCO The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was known as the Shanghai

Five, a security group founded mainly by China and Russia to counter Western domination of the Indian Ocean and East Asia in 1996. The SCO comprises China, Russia and four Central Asian nations Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. It was formed after signing the treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions in Shanghai.

Later, in 2001, when Uzbekistan joined, the SCO emerged as the largest trans-regional organisation in Eurasia. India and Pakistan joined the SCO at the Astana summit in 2017, and Iran joined as a full member-State in 2023, hosted virtually by India. Belarus will be the 10th nation to join as a member of the SCO in 2024, while Turkmenistan is not a member but remains a permanent invitee. The SCO also has several observer States, such as Afghanistan and Mongolia, and dialogue partners Armenia, Azerbaijan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. It covers one-quarter of the Earth’s surface and over 40 per cent of the world’s population, contributing one-third of the world Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Goals and Organisational Structure of SCO The main goals of the SCO’s principle-based regional organisation are to maintain regional peace and security, counter-terrorism, separatism, drug trafficking, climate change and extremism, and to promote political and economic development by establishing relations with the United Nations, ASEAN, CSTO and others. The SCO is governed by the Heads of State Coun-

New Delhi wants to expand interaction with Central Asian Nations, influence regional security policies, share civilisational ties with nations in the region

cil, which meets once a year as the supreme decision-making body. The Tashkent (Uzbekistan)-based Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), an integral part of the SCO, combats terrorism, separatism and extremism, which was formed on June 7, 2002.

Jaishankar delivers remarks on Modi’s behalf In 2024, on behalf of PM Modi, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr S Jaishankar delivered India’s statement at the 24th meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States. “The 21st century is the century of technology. It’s essential to harness this technology creatively and use it to benefit and advance our societies. India is one of the nations that has developed a National Strategy on Artificial Intelligence and launched an AI Mission. Our dedication to ‘AI for All’ is also evident in our collaboration within the SCO framework on a Roadmap for AI cooperation,” he said.

Notably, in most declarations, the member-States present a united front, reaffirming that “the SCO is not directed against other States” and committing to “a policy that excludes bloc, ideological and confrontational approaches” to address trans-regional issues. The members emphasised that “the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States, equality, mutual benefit, non-interference in internal affairs and non-use of force or threats of force are the foundation of sustainable international relations”. They also reiterated their “strong commitment to combating terrorism, separatism and extremism”.

In 2022, PM Modi emphasised that, “This is not an era of war,” referring to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, New Delhi always looks to secure its national interests at the summit, focusing on combating terrorism, mainly ‘cross-border terrorism’, where India accuses Pakistan-based terrorist organisations of being sponsored by Pakistan. Meanwhile, India and China have faced a three-

year border standoff in the Eastern Ladakh region.

Strategic Importance India has a strategic interest in participating in the SCO to maintain historical ties with Russia and addressing diplomatic disputes with China and Pakistan. It is an important platform for New Delhi to raise serious issues such as terrorism, border disputes, climate change, economic growth, development, cyber-security and others.

In the SCO meetings, New Delhi also stressed the strategic importance of respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty. Therefore, due to geopolitical and strategic calculations, I think, PM Modi will participate in the next SCO summit, which will be hosted by China in 2025. The complexities of the SCO require deft diplomacy, anchored in pragmatism, to explore areas of overlapping convergences in this multilateral setup. Despite challenges, the SCO remains a key vector in India’s Eurasian calculus. Further, the potential of the SCO remains untapped, including assistance on humanitarian grounds, disaster relief, terrorism, health and climate change — an issue affecting the majority of SCO nations.

Even so, due to geopolitical tensions, geo-economic forces and geo-technological advancements, it makes more sense to be part of this trans-regional international organisation than outside it. Also, New Delhi wants to expand interaction with the Central Asian Nations and influence regional security policies, along with sharing civilisational relations with nations in the region. “The SCO also provides us with a unique platform to unite people, collaborate, grow and prosper together, practising the millennia-old principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which means The World is One Family,” said Jaishankar.

(The author is a Senior Research Fellow and Doctoral Fellow at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)

Letters to the Editor

Rules are rules

The kneejerk reaction of politicians and major e-media to the Vinesh Phogat disqualification from the 2024 Paris Olympics was nauseating, irritating and lastly, amusing. Everybody should know that rules are rules and are meant to be followed strictly at all events, especially at the topmost level. Instead of wasting our time and energy on whining, let the rulers try to clean up and bring out the much-needed improvement in the country’s sports infrastructure. ANANTHANARAYANAN, Hyderabad

Broadcasting Services Bill

After successfully arm twisting the mainstream media into presenting news in a manner designed to present the government in a favourable light, the government is now trying to do the same with the digital media. The Broadcasting Services Bill is nothing but an attempt to keep the digital world under government control. There are many on digital platforms who have either been kicked out by mainstream TV channels or resigned from them for asking tough questions of the government. The government probably believes that some of the YouTubers were responsible for their not winning the last general elections as expected. In any democracy, the government must not only accept criticism but actually welcome it! ANTHONY HENRIQUES, Mumbai

Nation shocked

Vinesh Phogat’s disqualification from the Olympics shattered the dreams of 1.4 billion people in just a few minutes. The disqualification is a jerky shock for all Indians, but it can’t take away the sheen of Vinesh as a champion. This 100 gm defeat is a quintal time loss for her, but still we must not forget to appreciate Vinesh Phogat, who played exceptionally at her level. In an aggregate as well, this time, the performance of Indian athletes in the Olympic Games has not been too appreciable. A majority of the star players, including PV Sindhu, Dipika Kumari, Dipa Karmakar and now Vinesh Phogat, led to the unfortunate disappointment for the country. The medal tally for India is at just three, that too bronze. But nevertheless, we must not lose hope and wish for our players to clinch medals in the upcoming events. KIRTI WADHAWAN, Kanpur

Vinesh’s disqualification

India held its breath only to have its heart shattered following the disqualification of ace wrestler Vinesh Phogat for being ‘slightly overweight’ (in the 50 kg weight category in wrestling), which raises the all-important question about the accuracy and exactness of the weighing process being followed for wrestlers just before the start of the competition. (‘Oh! Vinesh’, August 8). The weight cut — a gruelling process that Phogat underwent a night before her fight in the 2024 Paris Olympics — is a cruel blow and a brutal aspect of wrestling. Athletes are not calculating machines programmed for victory. They are human beings and are complex individuals, carrying the hopes and dreams of millions of people of a nation, while battling their own demons. In Ms Vinesh Phogat’s malfeasance, we find a testament to the indomitable human spirit. Her cruel exit from the ongoing 2024 Paris Olympics reignites the debate about the pressures Indian athletes face and the need for fair and humane treatment to them. RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

India in the hotspot

Can India become rich before its population ages?

At the current growth rate, India will need 75 years to reach a quarter of US’ per capita income, World Development Report 2024 says. With a per capita income of around \$2,400, India is among the lower middle-income countries. Economists have warned that its economy could be headed for a ‘middle income trap’.

Is the Indian Ocean at a maritime crossroads?

China’s ports and ship deployments in India’s backyard raise concerns of control and influence in Indian Ocean as next possible flashpoint. China, which relies on free passage of the ocean for 80% of its crude oil imports, has accumulated strategic ports and related infrastructure from Arabian Sea to Malacca Strait.

India and Pakistan brace for rising ISIS threat

Officials from the two nuclear-armed rival nations also cast blame on one other’s country for allegedly having a hand in fostering the conditions that have allowed militants to take hold in their shared region.

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On the Edge

The spectre of a full-scale conflict involving Iran and Israel, bolstered by the former's network of regional allies, casts a long shadow over West Asia. This potential conflagration, fuelled not just by the recent assassination of Hamas's leader but also by long standing geo-political and religious tensions, underscores the precariousness of the region's stability. The possibility of an Iranian-led attack against Israel, leveraging its extensive support to regional militias, is not just a military scenario but a strategic chess move with profound implications for international security. Iran's strategy of arming and supporting proxy militias is deeply rooted in its post-1979 revolution history. Faced with international isolation and sanctions, Iran turned to asymmetric warfare, establishing alliances with non-state actors across West Asia. This network includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen. These groups serve as force multipliers, extending Iran's reach and influence far beyond its borders. A potential Iranian assault on Israel would likely be multi-pronged. This could include a barrage of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles, akin to the April attack following Israeli strikes on Iranian assets in Syria. Hezbollah's involvement would add another layer of complexity, with its formidable arsenal of rockets and missiles posing a significant threat to Israeli cities and infrastructure. The sheer volume of firepower from multiple fronts could strain Israel's sophisticated air defence systems, including the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow systems.

The implications of such a conflict are far-reaching. For Israel, the immediate concern would be the defence of its territory and population. The nation has proven its resilience and military prowess in numerous conflicts, but a coordinated assault from various directions would present unprecedented challenges. Casualties and infrastructure damage could be severe, testing the resolve and resources of the Israeli Defense Forces and the broader Israeli society. For Iran, the stakes are equally high. Engaging in direct conflict with Israel, particularly with the involvement of its proxy forces, risks provoking a broader regional war. The United States, a staunch ally of Israel, would likely be drawn into the conflict, escalating it to an international level.

The broader West Asian region would also be affected. Countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, already grappling with internal conflicts and instability, could see these issues exacerbated by a wider regional war. The humanitarian toll could be devastating, with civilian populations bearing the brunt of the violence. The potential for escalation underscores the urgent need for diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions. Regional and international actors must prioritise dialogue and conflict resolution to prevent a catastrophic war. The international community, particularly influential players like the United States, the European Union, and Russia, must engage proactively to mediate and reduce the risk of conflict. The costs of inaction are too high, not just for the directly involved countries but for global stability and security.

Running mate

The debut rally of US Vice President Kamala Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as the Democratic presidential and vice-presidential candidates respectively marks a pivotal moment in American politics. As they embark on their campaign tour, the dynamic between Ms Harris's established political clout and Mr Walz's fresh, progressive perspective is set to redefine the Democratic platform and potentially the future of the country. Ms Harris's decision to select Mr Walz as her running mate was a strategic move that speaks volumes about her campaign's direction and values. Mr Walz, with his extensive background in public service, education, and military, embodies a blend of experience and relatability. His career, from a high school social studies teacher to a governor, resonates with the desire of everyday Americans for leaders who understand their struggles and aspirations. In Philadelphia, Mr Walz's speech underscored his commitment to the common good, a theme that has been central to his political journey. His focus on progressive policies, such as free school meals and climate action, aligns with the growing demand for substantial reforms that address economic inequality and environmental sustainability. These issues are particularly pertinent in a post-pandemic America, where disparities have been exacerbated, and climate change continues to pose an existential threat. Mr Walz's ability to connect with rural, white voters, a demographic that has increasingly leaned Republican, adds a significant advantage to the Harris campaign. His folksy demeanour and genuine storytelling contrast sharply with the often polarising rhetoric seen in American politics. This authenticity could be crucial in bridging the divide that has plagued American society, fostering a sense of unity and common purpose.

The Harris-Walz ticket also presents a robust counter-narrative to Republican nominees Donald Trump and his running mate JD Vance. Mr Walz's critique of Mr Trump's presidency - highlighting mishandling of the Covid crisis, economic downturn, and rising crime rates - offers a stark reminder of the stakes in this election. His condemnation of the restrictions on women's reproductive rights further solidifies his and Ms Harris's commitment to protecting personal freedoms and promoting social justice. However, the challenges ahead are formidable. The Republicans have already begun framing the Harris-Walz duo as radical leftists, a narrative that will undoubtedly intensify as the campaign progresses. Overcoming this portrayal requires not just defensive rebuttals but a proactive demonstration of pragmatic policies and achievable goals. The Democrats must articulate a vision that transcends partisan lines, appealing to both their base and the undecided voters who will be crucial in swing states. Moreover, Ms Harris's campaign must navigate the intricacies of coalition-building within the Democratic Party itself. Selecting Mr Walz over other potential candidates, like Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro, indicates a preference for a broader, more inclusive appeal rather than catering to specific factions. This decision, while potentially contentious, underscores a strategic long-term vision aimed at unifying diverse voter blocs under a common agenda.

India and Vietnam ~ I

India shares civilizational and cultural linkages with Vietnam. People of India hold Vietnam and Vietnamese people in very high esteem for their tenacity and heroic struggle against imperialism and colonialism. The strategic bonding between India and Vietnam can be seen through the prism of India's protracted struggle against colonialism and imperialism. There is a very high degree of empathy, notwithstanding ideological differences



The Prime Minister of Vietnam Pham Minh Chinh visited India and met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 1 August. Modi iterated that Vietnam is a powerful pillar of India's Act East policy. Though the event was mentioned in the media, there was not much comment or analysis.

India shares civilizational and cultural linkages with Vietnam. People of India hold Vietnam and Vietnamese people in very high esteem for their tenacity and heroic struggle against imperialism and colonialism.

The strategic bonding between India and Vietnam can be seen through the prism of India's protracted struggle against colonialism and imperialism. There is a very high degree of empathy, notwithstanding ideological differences.

Vietnamese leaders like Ho Chi Minh and General Giap are household names to people of India who grew up during the tumultuous years of Vietnam's protracted struggle. The aim of this article is to put the relationship in the historical perspective.

Even prior to her independence, India had been paying careful attention to the developments in Indo-China in which Vietnam occupied the most critical space. India's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist stance resonated in its engagement with Vietnam.

India's eagerness to engage with Indo-China can be discerned from the fact that it invited the leaders of Vietnam including the legendary Ho Chi Minh to represent the country at the Asian Relations Conference held in April 1947, ahead of Independence on 15 August. India took interest in the unfolding grim situation in Indo-China particularly the heroic fight of the Vietnamese people against French colonialism.

Jawaharlal Nehru articulated India's nuanced position in Parliament. The larger considerations were four: the communist

character of the Vietnam leadership; the continued French colonial outposts in India; the emergence of communist China that bordered the communist-led part of Vietnam, and the fact that at the time France was with Britain, the chief source of weapons supply to India.

The Geneva Conference on Indo-China took place from 9 May to 21 July 1954, a day after the decisive defeat of the French. The new French Premier Mendes France realised that France could no longer hold Indo-China in bondage.

Britain and USSR played the role of catalytic agents and overcame the opposition of US secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai stole the limelight at the Conference.

In spite of India's significant role, India was not invited to the Conference, which peeved Nehru. He, however, deputed his confidant Krishna Menon to render informal assistance to the Conference. Nehru lamented that "we didn't stand on dignity, we just stood on the doorstep and tried to be helpful".

A significant contribution made by Zhou Enlai during the Conference was the proposal for the composition of the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The issue had become a sticky one since the Russian Foreign Minister Molotov had raised it earlier on 14 May 1954. India was invited to be the Chairman of the ICSC in the hope that she would be able to hold the balance. The Soviet delegation proposed four neutral nations as members, viz. Poland, Czechoslovakia, India and Pakistan. But

the non-Communists were opposed to it.

The British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden suggested five Colombo Plan nations, which Moscow's interlocutor Molotov rejected.

South Vietnam suggested the United Nations, which Communist China rejected. Both sides eloquently and stubbornly disagreed with each other.

Until 17 July, no agreement was reached, and a solution seemed elusive. On 18 July, however, Zhou Enlai proposed India, Poland and Canada as members. The proposal was accepted unanimously. In negotiating the proposal, the Chinese delegation acted in the sense of compromise. This was obviously Zhou Enlai's stand in Geneva, a position which the Chinese strongly urged other participants to share.

The Geneva Accords were the ray of hope in the dark clouds that overshadowed the Conference. The presence of ICSC represented the interest of the international community and was a symbol, albeit a weak one, of peace.

But the International Commission was soon inflicted with the atmosphere of the Cold War that prevailed between the Great Power blocs. Canada usually took a pro-Western stance while Poland adopted a pro-Soviet posture. India's task as the chair was unenviable. Pressure from all sides was mounted to use the Commission as a tool for one side or the other and for propaganda during the Cold War. India appointed T.N. Kaul, former Foreign Secretary as the Chairman of ICSC. When Kaul met Nehru prior to his departure to Vietnam, the PM told Kaul about India's close ties with the coun-

tries of Indo-China.

He emphasised the fact that the people of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were first and last, nationalists and patriots. Vietnam had resisted feudal China's domination for more than one thousand years.

He further told Kaul that under Ho Chi Minh's leadership, Vietnam would not submit to foreign domination.

Nehru warned Kaul that India's position as Chairman of the ICSC was important and delicate and that he hoped Kaul would discharge the onerous responsibilities impartially, in accordance with the letter and spirit of the Geneva Accords.

India welcomed the birth of Vietnam as an aspect of the resurgence of Asia and also the Geneva Accords.

Participating in a discussion on the Demands for Grants of the Ministry of External Affairs on 31 March 1955, ahead of the Bandung Conference, Nehru said, "it had become a regular practice for the affairs of Asia to be determined by certain great powers in Europe or sometimes in America, and the fact that people of Asia might have any views about those subjects was not considered a matter of very great importance. It is true that some importance is attached to those views now, because they cannot be ignored; nevertheless, it seems to be the high privilege of countries outside Asia to carry the burden of Asia on their shoulders, and repeatedly things happen and decisions are made affecting Asia in which Asia has little say."

India viewed the birth and liberation of Vietnam in the larger context of freedom and peace for the people of Asia and Africa. Nehru added, "... Freedom for them (people of Asia) is much more important than to those who have been used to freedom for a long time. Therefore, there is the passionate desire for peace and opportunity for progress in these countries and that is a common bond."

(To be Continued.)



RUP NARAYAN DAS
The writer is a former senior fellow of Indian Council of Social Science Research, affiliated to Indian Institute of Public Administration, and also a former senior fellow of Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

India must act

SIR, The fast unfolding developments in Bangladesh are doubtless a 'major diplomatic challenge for India' (Aug. 7). What started off as a student agitation against a quota system for jobs introduced by the government appears to have been hijacked by fundamentalist elements, snowballing into an anti-establishment agitation, catching the government and its security agencies unawares. Causing large scale loss of lives and destruction of properties, the upheaval has forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee the country.

The illustrious daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman might have ruled the nation in an autocratic fashion, during her 15-year tenure, but she did a great job of growing the nation's economy, besides upholding secularism, while keeping in check the fundamentalist forces.

In retrospect, it is clear that her political opponents were only waiting for an opportune moment to strike at and topple her government, by letting loose unprece-

dent violence.

The situation is fraught with grave consequences not only for Bangladesh, but also for India, which has always played an important role in its affairs, right from its birth.

Any unchecked violence, especially against Hindu minorities in that country may have con-

IGNORANT

SIR, Defacing the statue of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of Bangladesh, is not just an act of vandalism, it is an attempt to erase history and disrespect the legacy of a leader who played a pivotal role in the creation of the country. Such actions reflect profound ignorance and a dangerous desire to rewrite the past to fit certain narratives.

Those who seek to erase the name of their nation's founding father are essentially disowning their heritage and identity. It is crucial for a nation to honor and remember its roots to build a unified and informed future.

Disrespecting Sheikh Mujib's memory undermines the sacrifices made for independence and reveals a disturbing disregard for the truth. The actions of these individuals must be condemned and countered with a commitment to preserving historical integrity.

Yours, etc., Sukanta Mandal, Malda, 7 August.

sequences in India, instigating the right wing groups here into retaliatory attacks, disturbing the prevailing peace here.

Further, having one more hostile neighbour is not in India's interests. Also, the continuation of violence and unrest may cause flight of capital, discouraging investors, impacting the small nation's economy, besides increasing the possibility of illegal immigration into India, already a sore point between the two states. Con-

sidering all this, India needs to act with alacrity and prevent its eastern neighbour from sliding further into anarchy.

Yours, etc., V. Jayaraman, Chennai, 7 August.

NOT JUST QUOTAS

SIR, I refer to your editorial, "Targeted quotas". The Supreme Court's decision to direct governments to provide separate quotas for extremely backward people within the SC-ST category has the potential to bring about significant changes in Indian society.

This move aims to ensure that the most marginalised within these already disadvantaged groups receive adequate representation and opportunities. By advocating for logical and scientific criteria to determine these quotas, the Court emphasises a methodical approach to social justice, placing the responsibility on the government to implement these measures fairly and transparently.

However, the risk of politicisation looms large. Politicians might manipulate the allocation of benefits to maintain their vote banks, potentially reducing advan-

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

US' nasty doping smears only sully itself

The applause audiences have given the Chinese swimmers at the Paris Olympics for their good performance that won their country 12 medals as of Tuesday belies the China-bashing smears by some from the United States.

It is the splendid efforts of the Chinese swimmers that have prompted those with a political intent to leave no stone unturned in their dirty trick of tirelessly fabricating a dope scandal to stigmatize the Chinese athletes.

After 19-year-old Chinese swimmer Pan Zhanle set a new world record of 46.40 seconds when he stormed to victory in the men's 100m freestyle final on Wednesday last week, eclipsing his own previous record of 46.80 seconds set in Doha in February, those China besmirchers alleged his achievement was "inhuman" and could only be explained by doping, despite Pan having a clean record in that regard. Yet when a US swimmer performs "inhumanly", they call him "a flying fish".

And after China clinched its second swimming gold of the Paris Games by winning the men's 4x100m medley relay final on Sunday, ending the US' run of 10 successive gold medals in this event dating back to the Los Angeles 1984 Games, exactly the same group of people raised their voices again to claim the Chinese win was only achieved by doping. According to World Aquatics, the sport's governing body, the 31 athletes of the Chinese swimming team

underwent the most intensive testing, with each person being tested an average 21 times this year before the Paris Olympics started last month, while the personal average number of times of testing for all the swimmers taking part in the Games during the same period of time was 3.4.

The frequent testing was still intensively carried out after the Chinese swimming team reached Paris. Within the first 10 days of their arrival, the Chinese athletes had been checked by the World Anti-Doping Agency nearly 200 times, which means each person had been tested five to seven times on average a day during this period, with the first test at 6 am and the last one nought midnight in some cases.

That WADA has not found any problem with the Chinese swimmers has even become an excuse for some in the US, including the United States Anti-Doping Agency and some media outlets, to openly doubt its integrity and professionalism, which WADA firmly rebutted, saying that the US is trying to politicize the anti-doping cause and introduce its geopolitical schemes into the Olympics.

Shortly before the opening of the Paris Olympics, bipartisan House Energy and Commerce Committee leaders even required WADA President Witold Banka to attend a hearing of the committee on its probe into the WADA's testings of Chinese swimmers. That was understandably refused by the latter, who claimed, instead, that the organization plans to review the US' Rodchenkov Anti-Doping Act to ensure it complies with the rules of the regulatory body, noting "The United States cannot give themselves the right to investigate anti-doping cases in all countries in the world." The bill gives USADA and the US Department of Justice broad powers, including requiring international sports organizations to share investigative information and even allowing US judicial agencies to conduct cross-border investigations into overseas individuals and organizations.

Additionaly, this decision might spark demands for further caste enumeration and classification among backward classes, which could intensify societal divisions and animosities. Such classification could lead to increased competition among various sub-groups, creating further discord.

Moreover, with government jobs constituting only 2.8 per cent of the total employment opportunities, relying solely on quotas is insufficient to uplift Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

There needs to be a broader strategy that includes education, skill development, and economic opportunities to ensure comprehensive development and empowerment of these communities.

Quotas should be part of a larger framework of affirmative action and social welfare policies designed to address the root causes of inequality and marginalisation.

Yours, etc.,
Amarjeet Kumar,
Hazariabagh, 4 August.

History will be kinder to Sheikh Hasina

BHARAT DOGRA

Western media has a strange record of being very harsh to several leaders of the world at certain phases in time. To give a prominent example, at a time when Indian Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi had her finest hour while leading the country in the difficult times that culminated in the liberation of Bangladesh (of course this was much before the emergency days of 1975-77), the Western media inflicted much unjustified criticism on her efforts which were aimed at stopping Pakistan's genocidal actions.

In more recent times it was Sheikh Hasina who was at the receiving end of highly exaggerated criticism from Western media during her last few difficult months as the longest serving Prime Minister of Bangladesh, something which appears to be continuing even after her ouster. However those of us living in the immediate neighborhood should be capable of a more nuanced and balanced understanding of recent events as well as the overall legacy of Sheikh Hasina, and her leadership of her country.

Whatever some belligerent critics may be saying today, what one can assert with confidence is that when history records the events of these times, it will not be harsh to Sheikh Hasina. Instead, while it will record some mistakes she made and from which lessons must be learnt, on the whole, it will look at her with sympathy and overall have a positive view of her efforts and struggles.

Historians will view with great sympathy a lady who at the age of 27 received the devastating news that her parents, her 10-year-old brother and in fact almost all family members



had been murdered in the most cruel way in a coup against her beloved father, loved and respected as Bangabandhu all over the country by tens of millions of people. She herself had escaped only because she along with a sister was visiting West Germany. It would be difficult for anyone to recover completely from such a traumatic experience.

However this brave lady made a courageous effort not just to recover but also to leap into the struggles of her country in very difficult and high-risk situations. After spending some time in India, she went to Bangladesh at a time when hostile forces, including those responsible for the murder of her family members, were still in powerful positions. The political party of her father the Awami League was in a weakened position following hos-

tility and victimization by rulers. It was in such difficult conditions that she could strengthen the party and lead it to victory in elections for her first tenure as Prime Minister.

Again in difficult conditions she could return to election victory later and provide stability to her country for a stretch of almost 15 years. During her time the country could achieve significant development and in respect of some important human development indicators it could emerge much ahead of Pakistan.

It was during the Covid-19 days that the development effort suffered a big setback, partly as a result of the high dependence of the country on garment exports, which reflected a weakness of the economy. Once the economy faltered, problems like unemployment became more glaring

and opposition to reservations in jobs for freedom fighters increased. However Western media has not given much attention to some sincere efforts the Hasina government made for redressing such grievances.

Instead the Western media has given much more emphasis to her unhelpful attitude against opposition parties and forces. This writer has been consistently asserting the need for better relations between government and opposition parties, particularly in the context of South Asia. However, in the context of the opposition with which Sheikh Hasina had to deal, we should remember that for many years a significant section of them had consisted of fanatic and fundamentalist violent elements. Several of them had collaborated with Pakistan in its geno-

cidal actions. Some of them have been involved in violence against minorities like Hindus, Buddhists and Christians. Some of these had been involved with or were close to the forces which supported the murderers of Bangabandhu and other family members of Sheikh Hasina. So if there were problems in relations with such people and forces, these can be understood.

This is not to say that better policy and crisis management options were not available. This is also not to say that corruption was not a problem. With better skills at least the more sincere, non-fanatical elements among protesters could have been satisfied with some timely, much needed reforms.

Again, it is not that such efforts were not made by the Hasina government. However when a significant, resourceful section of opponents is bent on continuing violence and mischief, then the task of any government in finding timely, satisfactory solutions becomes more difficult.

What made the situation much more difficult was the foreign hand regarding which she warned in recent times even in Parliament. We have not heard the last of this yet and in the course of time it is likely that much more will be revealed just as much more was revealed later in the case of the murder most foul of Bangabandhu and his family members.

What we can certainly say even at the present juncture is that the highly exaggerated criticism of Sheikh Hasina is certainly not justified and history will confirm that her record as a leader was much better than what is being stated commonly these days.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Protecting Earth for Children, Planet in Peril, Man over Machine and A Day in 2071.)

100 YEARS AGO

OCCASIONAL NOTE

MANY of the tragic incidents on the Frontier arise out of attempts to storm a watch-tower held by a few fanatical Pathans. These towers, built of mud many feet thick, are impervious to bullets and shrapnel, and can only be demolished by the use of explosives laid at the base or by common shell, the manufacture, of which has been almost abandoned. A few years before the late War, we lost five officers and nearly forty men in an attack upon one of these towers, held by half-a-dozen Pathans who could not be dislodged by the means at the command of the regiment sent out to capture them. The story from Tochi follows similar lines, except that in this case the two khassadars who seized the tower were effectually disposed of by what the Simla telegram calls "a small fifteen pounder."

NEWS ITEMS

VIGOROUS IN NORTH-WEST INDIA

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)
THE rainfall for the week ending July 30 was scanty in Madras, South-East Madras, Deccan, the Bay Inlands, Orissa, United Provinces, East Konkan, and Hyderabad South; Normal in Upper Burma, Assam, Bengal, Bihar, United Provinces, West Sind, Central India, East Central Provinces, East Bombay, Deccan, Hyderabad North, Mysore and the Madras coast, north. Excess elsewhere. The monsoon was vigorous in North-west India.

RIVERS SUBSIDING

MYSORE GOVERNMENT RELIEF MEASURES

REPORTS from the affected areas indicate that the floods are subsiding everywhere. Kannambady discharge over the dam has fallen from 18 to 8 feet. The Government has ordered a free supply of timber from the forests to those rendered homeless. Relief parties with food are visiting several of the affected areas. It reported that Sivasamudram bridge has been completely washed away

APPEAL FOR FUNDS

To relieve the widespread distress caused by the floods, the local press is making a unanimous appeal for funds. "The task of relief is one far beyond local resources," says one paper. "Outside help is urgently needed if famine and starvation are not to be added the horrors caused by the floods. In this work of relieving distress all India should play a part."

SITUATION IN MYSORE

KRISHNARAJASAGARA REPORTED SAFE

A PRESS communique issued by the Government of Mysore, reviewing the flood situation in the State, says that the reports from various districts confirm the hope entertained yesterday that the floods were subsiding in all districts. Reports from Sivasamudram are assuring and Krishnarajasagara dam is reported safe.

The Deputy Commissioner of Shimoga reports that the statement made in yesterday's communique that the bridge near Charadi has been washed away is inaccurate and that it was only a small culvert near the bridge which was washed away. The Deputy Commissioner has been requested to organize relief parties immediately, consisting of a Revenue Sub-Division Officer, an Assistant Engineer, an Amildar, a Police Inspector, and 612 coolies in each affected district with a view to afford immediate relief to those who have had to abandon their houses.

A feature in connection with the distress in Mysore is the prompt help rendered by non-officials.

TO PREVENT WARS

GERMAN SUGGESTIONS TO THE LEAGUE

THE Government has informed the Secretariat of the League of Nations of its disagreement with the Mutual Guarantee Pact as ill-fitted to secure universal security and limitation of armaments. It is pointed out that a totally disarmed Germany would be in an impossible position.

The German Government has submitted the alternative suggestions that instead of piling up treaties and agreements subsidiary to the Covenant, the latter itself should be more thoroughly developed, that the violent settlement of disputes should be prohibited, that an Arbitration Court for political disputes should be instituted, and especially that disarmament should be compulsory for all States.

The Note adds that Germany will then be ready to enter the society of nations to co-operate in the preservation of peace.

Stepping into minds of Dhaka looters

SULAGNA MOHANTY

In recent days, the looting of personal belongings from the residence of Sheikh Hasina, the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, has captivated the public's attention and offered a revealing look into the complexities of human behaviour during societal unrest. This incident occurring amid widespread protests invites analysis of the psychological, social and economic dynamics at play.

At the core of this event is the psychological concept of de-individualisation which occurs when individuals lose their sense of personal identity within a crowd. This phenomenon reduces personal accountability allowing people to engage in actions they might typically avoid. In the chaotic environment of a protest, the anonymity provided by the crowd can diminish individual inhibitions, leading to impulsive and sometimes destructive behaviour.

This looting also accentuates the process of dehumanization directed at authority figures. Sheikh Hasina as the former head of state represents authority and power. During protests, authority figures often become symbols of oppression or targets of frustration. The looting of her personal belongings reflects a desire to strip her of her humanity; to reduce her from a national leader to a mere victim.

This dehumanization allows protesters to justify their actions and distance themselves from empathy.

The male looters' flaunting of Sheikh Hasina's expensive sarees and inner garments is a complex act intertwined with symbolic factors. By publicly displaying these intimate items, the looters not only tried to challenge Sheikh Hasina's authority and dignity but also engaged in symbolic defiance against the establishment. The exposure of inner garments, typically personal and hidden for a woman, is a deliberate violation of privacy meant to humiliate the former leader. In a patriarchal society, this behaviour reflects entrenched gendered power dynamics where men assert dominance and control over women.

By handling and showcasing Sheikh Hasina's clothing including her sarees and inner garments, the looters reinforce gender stereotypes casting her as vulnerable and themselves as aggressors thus amplifying the societal issues of power imbalance and disrespect for women's autonomy.

Economic disparities play a significant role in such acts of looting. When communities face inequality, frustration and resentment can build to a boiling point. The act of looting here can be perceived as reclaiming power or agency against perceived injustices. For some protesters, the personal possessions of Sheikh Hasina may symbolize wealth and privi-



lege intensifying their anger and prompting them to act.

Beyond material gain, looting also carries symbolic significance where by seizing personal items the protesters try to send a powerful message that the comfort and security of those in power can be disrupted just as ordinary people's lives are. This act of defiance is a form of protest against the perceived inequities perpetuated by those in authority.

The intensity of emotions within a crowd can quickly become contagious. Emotional contagion spreads feelings rapidly among individuals, often leading them to

mirror each other's actions. When one person starts looting, it can trigger a chain reaction with others following suit, caught up in the collective momentum. Additionally, the phenomenon of group polarization aggravates these dynamics. Within a group, shared emotions and beliefs can become more extreme, reinforcing the group's existing attitudes. In the case of the protests, the collective anger and frustration among the demonstrators intensified and led to a loop that fuelled the looting.

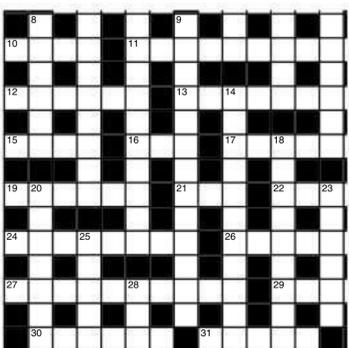
The looting of Sheikh Hasina's personal belongings is a troubling

manifestation of the complex interplay between psychological, social and economic factors. Such behaviour is not only destructive but also deeply concerning and calls for a thorough analysis to understand the motivations driving individuals to such actions. It is crucial to delve into the underlying causes to better comprehend the human psyche during times of upheaval. By doing so, one can get valuable insights into collective behaviour and work toward preventing such reprehensible outcomes in the future.

(The writer is an author and academician.)

CROSSWORD

NO-292869



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

ACROSS

- 1/4 Cause of 3,18, it's been claimed - crass! Please go for treatment (5,6)
- 10 Rector charging hundred for rent (4)
- 11 City junior left out what crook might be doing with money (10)
- 12 Has to move a long way back for descendants of Muhammad (6)
- 13 Cry of anguish during row - becoming more sensitive (8)
- 15 Carlyle maybe covering original matter (4)
- 16 See 28 Down
- 17 Potter's wife and daughter in valley (6)

DOWN

- 19 Tree burning - 27 content partially? (6)
- 21 Was due to read out lines (3)
- 22 Force to stop misrepresentation - got! (4)
- 24 Crack on, right - English runner going a long way round (3-5)
- 26 Cake's smell I'm not too sure about (6)
- 27 One lacking attacked this rich old member of family responsible for 1,4, allegedly (10)
- 29 Romeo's time for passion (4)
- 30 Escort out pretty unpleasant person (6)
- 31 Liberal not present - that's handy (2,3)

DOWN

- 2 One flaming woman - Marjorie - initially kept in picture? That's taking a broad view (9)
- 3 Statesman shot African lion (11)
- 5 See 28
- 6 Cycling race at home ground (5)
- 7 Swimmer in northern city upset about article (4,3)
- 8 Little bit extra? Son's grabbed 50! (6)
- 9 Bit loopy, endlessly untruce rambling - best say no more! (6,4,3)

- 14 Crazy dame found defending subject never previously considered (9-2)
- 18 Dead tree involved in trickery with others ultimately - ecological disaster (9)
- 20 Kind of rock music essentially gone weird (7)
- 23 Female Republican in Georgia's unconventional (6)
- 25 Scorer Henry cuts a tragic figure (5)
- 28/5/16 Share a new doctor - French one didn't hang around (3,3,3)

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

Daunting task ahead

The interim Govt led by Yunus must restore law and order in Bangladesh as there is chaos and fear all around

As Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus takes charge of the interim government of Bangladesh, he may have the challenging task of restoring peace and law and order in the country. Bangladesh, relatively a young nation, is once again in the throes of instability. The latest chapter in its ongoing saga of unrest, unfolded after the ouster of Sheikh Hasina and subsequent takeover by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. As Yunus steps into power, the country is gripped by fear and uncertainty, prompting hundreds of citizens to seek refuge in India. Recent months saw political violence, protests, and crackdowns on dissent, creating a volatile environment that led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina and chaos on the roads of Dhaka. The announcement of Muhammad Yunus, a globally renowned figure for his work in microfinance and founder of Grameen Bank, taking over the reins of power comes as a dramatic twist. Yunus, who has faced his share of political and legal challenges in recent years, has long been a critic of the Hasina Government's policies.



The political upheaval has triggered a wave of fear among the populace especially the minorities. Reports indicate that hundreds of Bangladeshis are attempting to cross the border into India, driven by concerns for their safety. The future course of Bangladesh's political landscape under Yunus' leadership is fraught with uncertainty. Yunus has been an advocate for political reform and transparency. His leadership could usher in a new era of governance, focusing on anti-corruption measures and democratic practices. However, implementing these changes in a deeply entrenched political system will be a formidable challenge. Besides, Bangladesh's economy has been under strain due to mismanagement and corruption. Yunus' expertise in economic development and microfinance could play a pivotal role in revitalising the economy, promoting entrepreneurship, and creating jobs. While some may view him as a saviour, others may see him as an outsider with no political experience. Building trust and garnering widespread support will be essential for his administration's success. However, the biggest challenge would be restoring peace and maintaining the law and order. Ensuring law and order during this transition period is paramount. Yunus will need the cooperation of the military and law enforcement agencies to maintain stability and prevent further violence. As Bangladesh stands on the brink of a new political era with Muhammad Yunus at the helm, the road ahead is uncertain. The immediate priority will be to address the fears of the populace and restore a sense of security, especially amongst minorities. All said and done, right now the army will call the shots and till elections are announced nothing can be said about the future of interim government itself. The coming days will be crucial in determining whether Yunus' leadership can guide the country towards stability and prosperity or if Bangladesh will descend into further chaotic unrest.

Government's policies. The political upheaval has triggered a wave of fear among the populace especially the minorities. Reports indicate that hundreds of Bangladeshis are attempting to cross the border into India, driven by concerns for their safety. The future course of Bangladesh's political landscape under Yunus' leadership is fraught with uncertainty. Yunus has been an advocate for political reform and transparency. His leadership could usher in a new era of governance, focusing on anti-corruption measures and democratic practices. However, implementing these changes in a deeply entrenched political system will be a formidable challenge. Besides, Bangladesh's economy has been under strain due to mismanagement and corruption. Yunus' expertise in economic development and microfinance could play a pivotal role in revitalising the economy, promoting entrepreneurship, and creating jobs. While some may view him as a saviour, others may see him as an outsider with no political experience. Building trust and garnering widespread support will be essential for his administration's success. However, the biggest challenge would be restoring peace and maintaining the law and order. Ensuring law and order during this transition period is paramount. Yunus will need the cooperation of the military and law enforcement agencies to maintain stability and prevent further violence. As Bangladesh stands on the brink of a new political era with Muhammad Yunus at the helm, the road ahead is uncertain. The immediate priority will be to address the fears of the populace and restore a sense of security, especially amongst minorities. All said and done, right now the army will call the shots and till elections are announced nothing can be said about the future of interim government itself. The coming days will be crucial in determining whether Yunus' leadership can guide the country towards stability and prosperity or if Bangladesh will descend into further chaotic unrest.

PICTALK



A priest performs 'aarti' at Bade Hanumanji temple which was flooded after heavy rains in Prayagraj

PTI

Rediscovering the true value of life

Amidst climate change and environmental crises, it's time to re-evaluate our priorities and appreciate the irreplaceable gifts that nature freely provides

The best things in life, they say, come free. It is a dubious statement that we may not readily agree to in a world where anything material has a price tag attached to it. The problem is not in the maxim that I opened this piece with; the problem is with our definition of "the best things". We have devised a curious way to assess our lives by putting a numerical value on everything we can possess and call our own. Even as we scamper all over the place trying to fetch luxuries and comfort items, we tend to forget several things which we do not personally possess but are indispensable to our existence. They are more valuable to us than all the material assets of the world put together. Air, sunlight, water, and soil for instance. Many things are too obvious for us to appreciate as I discovered recently when astronauts Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore got stranded in space. Reports say that her extended stay would affect her body adversely and as per NASA,



it could alter the structure of the eyes and brain, and their function "because low-gravity conditions shift the body's fluids toward the head". Gravity: The natural phenomenon that Newton discovered by chance in late 1666 when he saw an apple fall to the ground isn't something that we pay attention to in our daily lives. We take universal gravitation for granted, just as we take many other conventional things and natural forces as part of our privilege on this planet. The heat wave sweeping across the globe, the unprecedented floods and unseasonal snow are all testimonies of this casual attitude we have adopted towards the most valuable things in life that the universe has granted us. Climate change has been converted to a mere topic of discussion and not as a veritable threat for all species. Who will tell us that we have been presently allowed to live the best versions of ourselves aided by natural resources and no matter how hard we try, we cannot replicate these conditions in another part of the universe anytime soon? We may be vain to declare that space travel will soon become a regular thing thanks to man's daring explorations. We can claim that we are

doing everything we can to shift our domicile to another planet. But let us make no mistake - we cannot find another optimal domain to establish ourselves should the present one perish because of our over-indulgences. Our conceit might make us proclaim that the skies are for us to invade, but to find another place like this where everything is measured just right for our survival will only remain a pipedream. It's time we stopped taking the vital elements of existence as a given. It's time for us to stop expanding our wingspans without regard for nature. That an apple should fall is part of a grand cosmic design, but the fact that hills are sliding, forests are burning and villages are getting swept away is part of man's narrow and reckless nature. The value of the many simple blessings we have been bestowed with will be known only when these free privileges are taken away from us.

(The writer is a columnist and author based in Dubai; views are personal)



ASHA IYER KUMAR

doing everything we can to shift our domicile to another planet. But let us make no mistake - we cannot find another optimal domain to establish ourselves should the present one perish because of our over-indulgences. Our conceit might make us proclaim that the skies are for us to invade, but to find another place like this where everything is measured just right for our survival will only remain a pipedream. It's time we stopped taking the vital elements of existence as a given. It's time for us to stop expanding our wingspans without regard for nature. That an apple should fall is part of a grand cosmic design, but the fact that hills are sliding, forests are burning and villages are getting swept away is part of man's narrow and reckless nature. The value of the many simple blessings we have been bestowed with will be known only when these free privileges are taken away from us.

(The writer is a columnist and author based in Dubai; views are personal)

Cultural identity shapes behaviour

This cultural phenomenon, observed in many parts of the world, highlights the profound impact of inherited values on personal and collective actions



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

In India, several clans have their pedigree narratives. It is a great instrument for creating venerable ideals of behaviour and conduct and, above all, pride in their antecedents. Like many other places in the world, their pedigree is often traced to some other planet or has an anecdote or theory associated with their distinctive pedigree. Some consider themselves descendants of the Sun (Suryavanshi), others consider themselves descendants of the Moon (Chandravanshi), and so the call goes on.

The veracity of these claims is another story altogether, but invariably there is an ideal connected to them, and that is important. For example, the Suryavanshis are supposed to be very committed to their 'word of mouth', and they are supposed to never backtrack from what they have said or promised.

These ideals are important in identity formation and establishing a bottom line of behaviour. They also create a narrative of keeping the clan on track, such as it may be. There are fallouts for rituals, marriages, festivities, and more. Loyalty is not territorial because the clan has, often, migrated from its place of origin but the bonding is clear. Their rituals of festivities and celebrations keep the clan together, even though technology may have played its role in the widespread celebration and observance of clan identities. The protocols are very often strictly adhered to. Often these serve as an unwritten code of behavior.

There is another anecdote linked with planets, especially the Sun. Japan is considered to be the land of the rising sun, and there are anecdotes about special places in many parts of the world related to the sun. Toledo is a good illustration of a place where the sun's rays are said to have met the Earth for the first time. There are other rituals associated with the sun in many parts of the world as well. In



India, planet worship is considered particularly venerable by many components of the population, and the steps in sun worship are a widely shared phenomenon. This practice is often accompanied by pouring water facing the sun. Celebrating obeisance to the sun is popular and has many stories spun around it.

It may be useful to remind oneself that, in the belief of many, worship of even other planets is a virtuous thing to do. The point, however, is to recognise that behaviour is determined by one's belief, and this belief may not always be an act of choice but an act of an inherited value system and cognitive association with values that are considered virtuous. This component of tradition, which is common in many parts of the world, is now often referred to, not so complementarily, as the Third World Phenomena. The older the community, the greater their belief and the more grounded their behaviour.

In such communities' gender relationships have a strong overlay of traditional beliefs.



LIKE MANY OTHER PLACES IN THE WORLD, THEIR PEDIGREE IS OFTEN TRACED TO SOME OTHER PLANET OR HAS AN ANECDOTE ASSOCIATED WITH THEIR DISTINCTIVE PEDIGREE. SOME CONSIDER THEMSELVES DESCENDANTS OF THE SUN, OTHERS CONSIDER THEMSELVES DESCENDANTS OF THE MOON

Indeed, icons that grow up at times geography-wise and even climate-wise are significant factors in belief systems.

The broad takeaway from this narrative should be a realisation, that what goes into the composition of the human mind and belief system is often not only acquired from formal learning in the classroom but also by inherited and handed down beliefs.

This is an important aspect of learning which deserves far more attention even in formal learning systems. There is an obvious need to understand, all that goes into the making of one's identity and personality make-up.

One of the important dimensions should also be to assess and evaluate the complete personality of a person when recruiting him. The identity that that person carries may have many layers that are important for his work performance. Unfortunately, not enough literature is available to convert all this into assessment instruments. This understanding would help to

explain why there are so many times a situation of grief when a person is recruited on just what could be called his 'professional knowledge'.

It will be worth remembering that professional knowledge is indeed important in the work dimension but that is not a full personality at work. To create a work identity, it is important to selectively integrate the cultural identities of individuals with a focus on the organisational identity of the enterprise concerned.

This is an important dimension of work management that both employers and employees need to pay much more attention to, more than what they have enabled so far. This will help to manage, better, group identities at work and create a culture of resonance for greater productivity and fulfilment all around. The idea of focusing on the 'complete personality', to the extent possible, is worth considering.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BANGLADESH CRISIS

Madam — Amid the backdrop of controversial job reservations and widespread violent protests, Bangladesh has seen its former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed flee the country and seek temporary exile in India, a sanctuary supposedly facilitated by the United Kingdom. The nation now stands on the brink of establishing a new interim regime, led by Muhammad Yunus and supported by student unions and the military. It is deeply disappointing that the international community, with whom Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had maintained good relations—particularly China, the US, and the United Kingdom—turned a blind eye to her government during this crisis. The violent student protests, demonstrations, and clashes, followed by anti-government forces, went largely ignored by these global allies. China, despite being a close economic partner of Bangladesh, remained a passive observer throughout the turmoil.

India's support for Bangladesh during this tumultuous period is commendable and highlights Prime Minister Modi's political commitment to its neighbor, strengthening bilateral relations rooted in cultural and historical ties. However, it is regrettable that Hindu citizens and temples have borne the brunt of the lawlessness and vandalism, acts seemingly orchestrated to provoke Indian sentiments.

While the caretaker government led by the army appears to be a viable solution at the moment, it remains uncertain whether it can overcome the significant economic losses and extensive damage to national properties caused by the protests. There is hope that peace will prevail in Dhaka and that New Delhi's active involvement will help pave the way for the formation of an interim government, free from being hijacked by the military or anti-India radical elements.

Janga Bahadur Sunuwar | Bagarkote

We are proud of you!



Had the gravitational force acted on Vinesh Phogat been little bit kinder she would have not only lost the silver medal which was in her grab but would have also bagged a gold considering her performance in the tournament so far. Vinesh lost the gold by weighing 100 Grams more than the permit-

ted weight of 50 kgs in the category and also suffered a disqualification from the tournament. It is one of the most unfortunate thing that could have happened to her as a sportsperson, shattering her dreams. Regardless of this she is the golden girl and would be remembered for her superb performance.

While Phogat has been successful in bagging Gold and silver medals in Commonwealth and Asian games, courtesy misfortune Olympics has been eluding her as she suffered an injury in Rio olympics in 2016 while in 2020 Tokyo olympics and in the Paris olympics yesterday she suffered a cruel disqualification! Phogat, you might have lost Gold medal in Olympics, for sure you have won a place in the hearts of all the sports lovers in the world! We are proud of you!!

Gopalaswamy J | Chennai

THE PLIGHT OF SEWER WORKERS

Madam— Kudos to Mr N Sadhasiva Reddy for his letter titled "Death of sanitation workers" (August 7). Our eardrums are constantly bombarded with the triumphant declarations of "conquering" the other side of the Moon, yet all that is provided for a sewer worker risking his life for society's "dirty work" is an ordinary rope. Billions of state funds are invested in mass yoga performances on the streets to showcase the country's "might" to the world, yet the same ordinary rope is the only safety measure for the poorest souls in this "mighty" India. Gigantic statues and bullet train projects are undertaken to "mesmerize" the world, but the faceless manual scavengers who work tirelessly to keep our environment clean receive no more than that ordinary rope.

Those who ignore the plight and suffering of these unsung heroes, without whose essential service our "civilized modern" society would come to a standstill, are nothing short of barbarians.

Kajal Chatterjee | Kolkata

PREAMBLE MISSING IN NCERT BOOKS

Madam — The absence of the "Indian Constitution" preamble in some NCERT textbooks for certain classes should not lead to blame. Instead, consider this as an opportunity to highlight its sacred importance and encourage students to learn it with increased focus.

This can greatly contribute to shaping a clean thought process centered on equality and the socialist republic structure. It would be beneficial if NCERT issued a circular or sent an online message to all schools following the NCERT syllabus, advising them to download the preamble from Google or refer to other NCERT textbooks. Emphasising its sacred points with enhanced focus during teaching can greatly benefit the students. It is very important that today's children know about our freedom struggle and how our Constitution was written.

PV Srinivas Sreelekha | Secunderabad

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

HASINA'S OUSTER: A BLOW TO INDIA

Ouster of Sheikh Hasina shakes India's strategic balance in the neighbourhood



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

A full-fledged crisis has been lobbed in India's court, with the ouster of PM Sheikh Hasina earlier this week. India's already troubled neighbourhood has now three countries under the firm grip of the armed forces. Pakistan, Myanmar and now Bangladesh, are now the army-ruled troika, on a slippery slope of getting too close to China. Out of the two, it was Bangladesh which has been the crown jewel of India's neighbourhood first policy, having had a visibly pro-India government for the past decade and half. Pakistan has been China's proxy state acting against Indian interests, while Myanmar due to the army rule, has also slipped closer to China. Meanwhile, a pro-China (read anti-India) leader in the Maldives, a not-too-Delhi-friendly regime in Nepal, presents Indian diplomacy as one of its biggest challenges in recent history.

Former PM Sheikh Hasina, despite her dictatorial governance style, enjoyed bipartisan support in India. She used her relations with Narendra Modi and the opposition leaders in India, to come out heavily on extremist forces operating on Bangladeshi soil against India's interests. It is no coincidence that former PM Hasina has travelled to New Delhi thrice in a year. PM Modi, lauded her efforts in upgrading the bilateral relations when she came for a state visit, a first under the new government in the centre. Indo-Bangladesh bilateral grew from strength to strength during Sheikh Hasina's decade and a half-regime, with important long-term infrastructure projects being operationalised by India and increasing new transit and trade corridors between the two



neighbours. India shares, nearly 4000 km of land border with Bangladesh, bringing its 5 states in unique proximity to the neighbour. This land border, the fifth largest land border in the world, acts as a porous conduit for the movement of goods and people during times of bonhomie, as governments maintain strict vigil keeping in mind each other's interests. This was visible during Sheikh Hasina's tenure when cross-border smuggling and terrorism had nearly vanished. This has built a very comfortable position for Indian diplomats, as they have trusted a friendly regime to keep Indian interests in mind. However, with Sheikh Hasina, gone and chances of her never being back in the political arena of Bangladesh looking extremely certain, things are about to change. India has not built bipartisan support for itself in the local Bangladeshi politics.

It has chosen to be cosy with Sheikh Hasina's government and dealt with overtures from the principal opposition party in Bangladesh with nonchalance. The fear was, that showing any affinity to Bangladesh's opposition party may not be taken kindly by Sheikh Hasina. Therefore a public diplomacy narrative emerged, that Sheikh Hasina was 'too close to be comfortable', with India and acting against her nation's interests. A caged opposition in Bangladesh managed to get external support from China, and Pakistan's intelligence agency, both of whom have a huge interest in keeping India under constant stress in the geopolitical affairs of the region. The on-ground situation in Bangladesh currently is against India. The current interim regime has allies who may be infiltrated with extremist elements, with whom India has had bitter experiences in the past. The nature of the protests and subsequent ouster of Sheikh Hasina ensured that any of her policies, including being pro-India would not be taken too kindly by the Bangladeshi citizens. An anti-Sheikh Hasina mood could easily be swayed to anti anti-India mood, which would be detrimental to the long-drawn deep bilateral relationship. It would be a challenge for India to work new bunch of leaders in Bangladesh and remain a crucial strategic allies for the eastern neighbour.

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

Bangladesh at political crossroads

The interim government faces a formidable task in restoring law and order, organising free and fair elections, combating corruption and gaining public trust



K S TOMAR

According to British paraspyologist Celia Elizabeth Green, "In an autocracy, one person has his way; in an aristocracy, a few people have their way; in a democracy, no one has his way." This sentiment resonates deeply with the ousted former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, who refused to acknowledge the clear signs of her impending downfall. Conspiracy theory is gaining momentum which led to ouster of EX PM, Sheikh Hasina which allegedly included the intelligence agencies of America (CIA), Pakistan (ISI) and China which yearned for an alternate government led by EX PM, Khalida Zia who might be on her way of ascendancy to power in future. Another version points out the preference of China and Pakistan to have Anti-Indian government in Dhaka which might alter the regional balance in South Asia.

CONSPIRACY THEORY. There have been numerous speculations and allegations regarding the United States' involvement in attempts to oust Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Some argue that the U.S. might be seeking a more favourable government in Dhaka due to concerns over human rights, democratic practices, and regional security dynamics. Critics suggest that American interests, particularly in countering China's growing influence in South Asia, might drive such alleged conspiracies.

However, concrete evidence of U.S. involvement in any conspiracy against Sheikh Hasina is lacking. Officially, the U.S. government has maintained a stance of promoting democratic values and fair elections in Bangladesh. Publicly, U.S. officials have expressed concerns about political repression and the fairness of the electoral process under Hasina's administration but stopped short of endorsing any regime change. Sheikh Hasina's administration has leveraged these allegations to bolster nationalist sentiment and consolidate power, portraying itself as a bulwark against foreign interference. This narrative resonates with many Bangladeshis, fostering a perception of external threats to national sovereignty. Ultimately, while suspicions persist, the claims of direct American involvement in a conspiracy to oust Sheikh Hasina remain speculative and unproven. The situation underscores the complex interplay of domestic politics and international relations in Bangladesh.

Hasina's dramatic fall from grace has not surprised many, except perhaps herself. She ignored the rising tide of public discontent and the conspiracies hatched by vested interests aiming to assert dominance in South Asia and undermine India.

Winning 288 out of 300 seats in the January 2024 elections, alongside the arrests of opposition leaders and suppression of dissent, highlighted a significant loss of credibility for Hasina, culminating in widespread revolt and her eventual ouster.

Hasina, a pro-democracy leader who witnessed the sacrifices made by her late father and family, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh, has now left the nation poised for a potential regime dominated by hardliners, anti-India, and pro-China forces, possibly sandwiching this troubled nation between two powers in the future. The interim government faces several challenges:

Restoring Political Stability: establishing neutral ground and engaging in dialogue with all political factions to ensure a peaceful and democratic transition.



Organizing Free and Fair Elections: Ensuring upcoming elections are free, fair, and credible to restore public trust in the democratic process.

Combating Corruption: Initiating anti-corruption drives to target high-profile politicians and business leaders while ensuring fairness.

Maintaining Law and Order: Managing protests and civil unrest carefully, and ensuring security forces act with restraint to avoid human rights abuses.

Ensuring Human Rights: Balancing order with respecting human rights and avoiding authoritarianism. Gaining Public Trust; Building public confidence through transparency, effective communication, and inclusive policies.

International Relations: Engaging with international organizations, donor countries, and regional allies to ensure continued support and investment. The political upheaval in Bangladesh over the past 13 months has been deeply polarizing and emotionally charged citizens.

Experts attribute the whirlwind of violent emotions to an unresolved conflict over the nation's identity—a conflict that must be successfully addressed for the country's survival. There is no denying that Hasina was a secular and reformist figure in Bangladesh.

Her government had been instrumental in ensuring safety and fostering economic growth, making Bangladesh one of the fastest-growing developing nations. Yet, her leadership was marred by accusations of election rigging, suppression of opposition, and human rights violations, which stoked public discontent.

The crisis reached its peak with unprecedented violence and street protests, allegedly orchestrated by Pakistan's intelligence agency ISI, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, and active involvement from Khalida Zia's BNP and Chinese intelligence networks.

Amidst this turmoil, Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus was chosen to lead an interim government after consultations with military leaders and key stakeholders. Experts and ex-diplomats agree that the current turmoil is a by-product of the public uprising against Hasina, who fled the country with India's assistance. She is now seeking asylum in Europe, with the UK being a potential destination, though nothing is certain.

Comparative Analysis of Hasina and Rajapaksa's Ousters: There are several similarities between Sheikh Hasina's downfall in Bangladesh in 2024 and the ouster of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in 2022. Both events stem from political, economic, and social factors.

Economic Mismanagement and Authoritarian Governance: Sheikh Hasina faced criticism for stifling dissent and undermining democratic processes. Similarly, Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration was criticized for authoritarianism and nepotism. Both countries struggled with economic difficulties, rising living costs, and unemployment, leading to public frustration and mass protests.

Debt and Foreign Exchange Issues: Bangladesh experienced increasing national debt and challenges in managing foreign exchange reserves, while Sri Lanka faced a severe economic crisis characterized by foreign exchange shortages and high inflation, leading to widespread hardship.

Public Unrest and International Factors: Both countries saw mass protests against economic hardships and political repression. The international relations of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were strained due to economic mismanagement and human rights abuses, affecting foreign aid and investment.

Challenges for India: The ouster of Sheikh Hasina presents several

challenges for India: **Political Instability in Bangladesh:** The removal of a stable, pro-India government may lead to political instability, creating a power vacuum that could be filled by elements less friendly toward India.

This could foster anti-India sentiments and alter bilateral relations.

Border Security and Migration: Political changes might affect cooperation on border management, potentially increasing challenges related to illegal migration, human trafficking, and terrorism.

Economic Relations and Trade: Changes in the political landscape could impact ongoing and future trade agreements, affecting bilateral trade beneficial to both countries.

Geopolitical Dynamics: A new leadership might tilt towards China, enhancing its influence in Bangladesh and affecting India's strategic interests in the region. Counterterrorism Efforts; A change in leadership might alter the level of collaboration on counterterrorism, impacting efforts to combat terrorism and insurgency.

Water-Sharing Disputes: The Teesta River water-sharing agreement, already a contentious issue, might face new challenges with a change in leadership.

India's Strategic Response: Experts suggest India should engage diplomatically with the new leadership, enhance border security, reassess trade agreements, and strengthen regional alliances to counter external influences like China's growing presence in Bangladesh.

Navigating these challenges requires a careful balance between immediate stabilization measures and laying the foundation for long-term democratic governance. The success of the interim government in managing these issues is crucial for providing stability to Bangladesh.

(The writer is a strategic affairs columnist and political analyst based in Shimla; views are personal)



THERE IS NO DENYING THAT HASINA WAS A SECULAR AND REFORMIST FIGURE IN BANGLADESH. HER GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN ENSURING SAFETY AND FOSTERING ECONOMIC GROWTH, MAKING BANGLADESH ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING DEVELOPING NATION

Khalistan movement is bereft of any vision, survives merely on hatred

Khalistan movement harps upon divisive tactics and has struggled to present a viable vision for a sovereign state nearly fifty years since its inception

Gurupatwant Singh Pannun, of Sikhs for Justice, recently released a video over his X-handle that Chandra Arya, a Hindu Member of Parliament in Canada's House of Commons should go back to India. Arya had earlier criticized the Khalistani extremists for vandalism at BAPS Swaminarayan Temple in Edmonton in Alberta state. The temple was recently found sprayed with anti-India graffiti of recognizably Khalistani variety.

Why do Khalistani always need to assert their existence through hatred of the Hindus? If they are indeed fighting for a sovereign Khalistan, even though no sensible or patriotic Indian would approve of it, they must establish the tenabil-



PRIYADARSHI DUTTA

ity of the idea. Strangely, a movement approaching 50 years has not been able to throw up a credible map of Khalistan. On June 9, 2022, Pannun released a map of the idea. At an event held at Lahore Press Club which showed Shimla, Himachal Pradesh as the capital of Khalistan. Could things get more ridiculous? The Sikhs comprise less than two per cent of Himachal Pradesh's

population. Their percentage same in Shimla city, which is not contiguous to Punjab where most Sikhs live. The map in addition to Punjab encompassed almost the whole of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, five districts of Rajasthan, several districts of Uttarakhand and several districts from Uttar Pradesh.

The net effect of such a map would be to reduce the Sikhs into a minority in Khalistan. In the early 19th century, Maharaja Ranjit Singh could rule over trans-Sutlej Punjab, by the dint of sword, despite the Sikhs comprising no more than 10 per cent of the population (based on Census figures, 1881). This was because the form of government was autocratic in an era of autocr-

racy. Still, the Maharaja had to pursue an inclusive and tolerant policy given the fractured religious demography of Punjab.

In the 21st century, when democracy has triumphed in the sub-continent, do Khalistanis propose to turn the clock back on political evolution? The fact that "Khalistan" should be carved out from the Indian side of Punjab alone makes the motive of its sponsors suspect.

Few Sikhs indeed remain on the Pakistan side of Punjab, from where the bulk of them were ethnically cleansed after the partition. However, the very same fact should prohibit the Sikhs from pursuing any secessionist agenda from the Indian side. The Sikhs concentrated in the fertile terrains of



central Punjab, which fell to the Pakistan side, and took refuge on the Indian side after the partition.

There was a forcible exchange of population between the two halves of Punjab on religious lines. This bolstered their population from 13 per cent in colonial Punjab (Census, 1941) to 33 per cent in East Punjab (Census, 1961). After the reorganization of Punjab (1966), whereby Hindu-dominated Haryana

and Himachal Pradesh were separated, their population share increased to 60.2 per cent in rump Punjab (Census, 1971).

There is no grouse against Sikhs becoming a majority in Indian Punjab, as never before in the history of Punjab. However, there would certainly be a grouse if this majority, of less than two-thirds, wants to secede from the territory of the state.

Questions will be asked why they have not demanded a single square inch of territory from the Pakistan side and all liability is on India which had graciously accommodated the Sikhs after the partition. The Khalistanis could grumble that not conceding a sovereign nation to the Sikhs during the partition itself was an injustice.

This is a bogus argument. None of the districts in colonial Punjab had a Sikh majority, which made the demand for "Khalistan" completely untenable.

As early as December 2, 1942, Master Tara Singh had asked for the bifurcation of colonial Punjab - one dominated by the Muslims and another by Hindu-Sikhs. History aside, "Khalistan" would put the future of Sikhs in jeopardy. Around 30 per cent of wheat procured by authorities and 21 per cent of rice procured during FY. 2021-22 came from Punjab alone. The loss of this assured procurement by the Food Corporation of India will put Punjab under mountains of rice and wheat. The "Khalistan", a landlocked nation sandwiched between

India and Pakistan, will be dependent on trade with both. Even today it can redirect its procurement mechanism profitably towards other states rather than favouring Punjab. However, Punjab, whose 75 population is dependent on agriculture for livelihood would be sorely hit. The loss of a huge pan-Indian market for Punjab will be disastrous in every sector e.g. transportation, hosiery, machine tools etc. The Sikh population in other states of India would be adversely affected. No wonder, the Khalistanis prefer to stroke passions, by ducking these critical questions.

(The writer is an author and an independent researcher based in New Delhi. The views expressed are personal)

DECCAN Chronicle

9 AUGUST 2024

Vinesh will always remain synonymous with courage

One of the greatest tales in the long-running saga of sport in Indian society in the modern era ended like a Greek tragedy, much to the chagrin of a billion sports fans. Vinesh Phogat, who richly deserved a medal for her stubborn persistence towards proving that the system is crooked in a society that fails to protect its women from harassment, is now appealing to the international arbitration court for an Olympic medal that was hers save for her being 100 grams overweight at the scales for her 50-kg classification wrestling final at the Paris Olympics.

The Vinesh Phogat saga had much in it to illustrate how the seeming normality of sport is a myth in an abnormal, male-dominated society. Her failure to manage her physicality according to the rules could be termed her only one as she did the unimaginable in beating the wrestler Yui Susaki who had never been beaten in a major competition in an 82-0 record. She downed two more champions on her way to the summit, all in the space of one great day in which she exhibited all her fighting qualities, her nous and tactical understanding of her sport.

Of course, the rules should not bend for anyone, though the principle may be anathema to a sentimental Indian society with its known disdain for rules and regulations where the exception seems to always slay the rule. The Olympic rules that allow persons of doubtful gender definitions compete as women in the boxing ring can be questioned, but that is not germane to the issue of classification by weight in wrestling.

The question that needs to be answered is how in a disqualification of this type an athlete loses even the record she had set on the day that she was qualified to fight and won the right to a medal, which is why Vinesh's plea for a joint silver medal seems justified. Circumstances had forced the doughty wrestler with the blazing eyes to go for the tougher lower 50-kg category as another athlete, Antim Panghal, had qualified in that slot based on her world championship performance.

Vinesh had been busy fighting for nearly half a year in 2023 to expose the venality of a powerful politician-sports administrator against whom the normal rules regarding dealing with those accused of sexually harassing women did not seem to apply. And then she had to tend to mend the torn ligament that had stopped her in Tokyo, before taking the 50-kg route for a dab at Olympic glory in Paris.

The story of her valiant efforts to get under 50 kg on the scale on the morning of the final has been told and voluminously so. A whole night's battle against body weight may, however, be classified as a minor challenge in her life for a gutsy sportsman who saw her father killed when young and who fought every inch of her way up in life and career. For someone who was dragged around by police personnel at the Jantar Mantar protest site by her hair, the fight for justice in any field was something that came naturally.

Having to shed some of that hair and shorten her wrestling uniform were small sacrifices she made at the end in her despair to get to the mat for the final. Her name will now onwards be synonymous for a sportsperson who not only excelled in her chosen discipline but also stood up for justice for all sportswomen who have had to endure the creepy presence of perverts among administrators. Even a sparkling Olympic medal pales in comparison to the cause of safety of sportspersons that she fought for.

No surprises: RBI sticks to line

As expected, the Reserve Bank of India-led Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has kept the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.5 per cent. The policy stance continues to be the withdrawal of accommodation, which means the rate of interest will remain elevated to keep inflationary expectations in check. Though the country's economic growth continued to be resilient, the central bank flagged rising consumption-focused loan portfolio and growth in alternative investments.

Retail inflation rose to 5.1 per cent in June 2024, owing to higher-than-expected food inflation. Food items together have a weight of around 46 per cent in consumer price index based inflation and have contributed to 75 per cent of the retail inflation in June.

As food takes away more than 50 per cent of a poor family's income in India, the RBI under the Narendra Modi era has been rightly focusing its attention on keeping the inflation in control without running after higher economic growth. However, the government should also take note that monetary policy cannot address food shortages. In spite of India's tremendous strides in technology and farming, it is a matter of shame that the country has not been able to fix the issue of vegetable prices that have contributed to 35 per cent of the retail inflation in June.

While the RBI continues to expect a 7.2 per cent growth for the current financial year, it admitted that certain high frequency indicators showed lower than anticipated corporate profitability, general government expenditure and core industries output. However, on the positive side, manufacturing activity continues to pick up on the back of improving domestic demand, while the services sector remains buoyant. Private corporate investment is gaining steam on the back of expansion in bank credit. The spillovers from protracted geopolitical tensions, volatility in international financial markets and geoeconomic fragmentation, however, pose risks on the downside.

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KAUSHIK MITTER
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R. MOHAN
Resident Editor

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DECCAN CHRONICLE offices are located at:
Chennai: SP 5 Developed Plot, Industrial Estate, Guindy, Chennai 600032. Phone: (044) 22254750, 22254751

Coimbatore: No. 2/22 Sengalipalayam Road, N.G.G.O. Colony Post, Kurundampalayam Village, Coimbatore-641022. Phone: (0422) 2231255, 2231256

Hyderabad: 36, Sarojini Devi Road, Secunderabad 500 003. Phone: (040) 27803930-4. Fax: (040) 27805256

Visakhapatnam: Survey No. 1/3A Beach Road, Near Kailasagiri Ropeway, Sector-9 MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam- 530 017. Phone: (0891) 2552333/2552334, Fax: (0891) 2752385

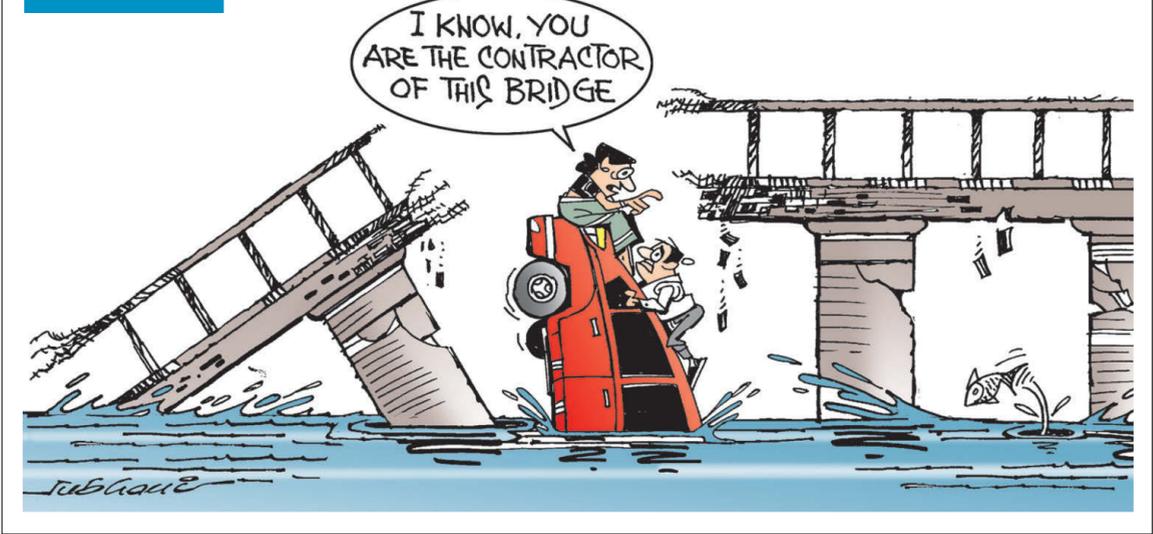
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Rajahmundry: Vemagiri, Dhawleswaram Rd, Rajahmundry 533125. Phone: (0883) 2417208, 2417618

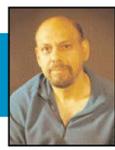
Nellore: Survey No. 527/2, Burrampur Village, Venkatachalam (M), Chemudugunta Panchayat, Nellore. Phone: (0861) 2348581/ 82, Telefax: (0861) 2348580

Karimnagar: H. No. 1-21-12/1, Cheralabhtur Road, Mugudhumpur Village, Karim Nagar - 505186
Phone : 9121181123

Subhani



The Dragon's bear hug: A strategic blunder by US?



Indranil Banerjee

The United States might well have committed its biggest strategic blunder in recent history by pushing China into the welcoming arms of Russia. A series of Western trade curbs, geopolitical alliances to contain Chinese assertiveness, curbs on hi-tech flows, sanctioning of businesses and increased military patrolling in sensitive areas such as the Taiwan Straits have combined to rattle Beijing in recent times. But what could have been the proverbial straw on the camel's back was the Nato secretary-general's recent threats of possible asset seizure for Beijing's continued support of Russia's war effort in Ukraine. Far from intimidating Beijing, however, this appears to have rebounded and only tightened the growing bonds between Moscow and Beijing.

The Moscow-Beijing hug is now strategic. Russian President Vladimir Putin's May 2024 visit to Beijing, where he received an unprecedented welcome from Chinese President Xi Jinping, was an indicator of changing times. The two leaders met face to face again recently as in July this year during a SCO summit at Astana, where Mr Putin declared that relations between China and Russia, which constitute a "comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation", are now "experiencing their best period in history". President Xi Jinping added that their two countries "should continue to uphold the original aspiration of friendship for generations to come".

The two leaders have made it unequivocally clear that they are striving for a more "fair" and "equitable" world, implying that the current world order dominated by the Western powers needs to be realigned.

Within weeks, it turned into a mass uprising, breaking the hold of an authoritarian regime. It united all kinds of Opposition forces. The events of the past weeks also exposed the fault lines in the system. It was an implosion waiting to happen. It just needed a trigger, which was provided by the student protests. The allocation of 30 per cent of government jobs to families of freedom fighters had been abolished following protests in 2018, but was restored this year. It was seen as a move to pack institutions with Awami League loyalists.

It was not just the political repression and worsening human rights situation, but also the rising cost of living and growing unemployment among the youth that fuelled the unrest. Not surprisingly, Gen Z has been at the vanguard of the movement that ultimately led Hasina Wajed to step down and flee the country. Although Bangladesh has been one of the fastest-growing economies in the region over the past many years, the gap between the haves and have-nots has also widened there. Inflation, which touched double digits in recent months, has also fuelled discontent.

Hasina Wajed entered politics after the assassination of her father and founder of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in a military coup in 1975. She lived in exile in India for several years before returning to the country in 1981. She first became PM after her Awami League party swept

the elections in 1996. But she lost the next election to her rival, Khaleda Zia. The two women dominated Bangladesh politics for several years. Hasina won the 2008 elections, which took place after two years of a military-backed "technocratic government". This phase marked her authoritarian grip over power. She jailed her opponents, including her main rival, Khaleda Zia. Her government executed many Opposition leaders after dubious trials for being "collaborators" during Bangladesh's war of independence.

Her party won four successive elections, all marred by allegations of rigging. The last elections held in January this year were boycotted by the main Opposition parties. It reportedly saw the lowest turnout of voters in the country's history. Human Rights Watch said the country's prisons were full of Opposition activists arrested in a crackdown before the elections.

With virtually no presence of the Opposition parties in Parliament, it paved the way for a one-party system. The recent elections marked the beginning of the downfall of Hasina Wajed's rule. What happened in Dhaka this week, with angry mobs ransacking the former Prime Minister's residence and destroying statues of Mujibur Rahman, was a manifestation of the public rage against authoritarianism. The spectacle of uncontrolled mobs ruling the streets in the absence of

When Kissinger passed away in late November last year, the Chinese government lamented that it had lost an 'old friend of the Chinese people' but others saw it as a 'watershed moment'

of China thanks to Western tech and capital flows is now history. The joint flight of Russian and Chinese bombers in what is being euphemistically called a "routine patrol" near Alaska indicates that the wheel has turned full circle for the Russia-China relationship. Western attempts at intimidation and coercion, far from driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, have only hammered the two former Eurasian rivals closer. The two sides have stepped up military cooperation including joint naval exercises like the one held in July in the South China Sea. China has also begun sending its PLA Navy towards the exclusive economic zone of the US near the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska, and has proclaimed itself a "near-Arctic state" with vital interests in that region.

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has hinted at further complications when he said that Russia and China should "jointly counter interference by forces from outside this region in the affairs of Southeast Asia..." This region, especially its seas, has become a region of intense great power rivalry. The matter is complicated by the Taiwan issue and US power projections in the Indo-Pacific. What Mr Lavrov is suggesting is extending the area of conflict with the United States into this region as well.

It is difficult in the circumstances to deny that a new era is dawning in international politics. When Kissinger passed away in late November last year, the Chinese government lamented that it had lost an "old friend of the Chinese people", but others saw Kissinger's death as a "watershed moment" for their country. One Chinese commentator remarked: "From now on, it's the beginning of our rise and for the US to go down". While that could be wishful thinking, it certainly points to heightened great power rivalry from now on.

This opened a new era not just in US-China relations but marked a turning point in global geopolitics. The Soviet Union was contained, even hemmed in from both the west and the east. The Washington-Beijing alliance emerged as the strongest pole in the world. The subsequent rise

For the first time in more

LETTERS

VIOLENCE IN BANGLADESH

What is most distressing is that protesting Bangladeshi students vandalised the statue of Mujibur Rahman forgetting the sacrifices of the founder. The students' cause may be genuine, but the way in which they approached having their problems addressed is excessive. It is grotesque to lend credence to an impression that there is a US hand in the political game. Student federation is not an outfit to be backed and topped by the government. Besides, nobody knows how long the interim government would last. The new government should ensure that China does not intrude and dabble in its affairs.

Rajamani Chelladurai,
Palayamkottai

INSTABILITY SURROUNDS US

"You change your friends but not your neighbours" - AB Vajpayee's words must resonate in diplomats of the foreign ministry. An autocrat has fallen in Bangladesh. There are armed rebels in Myanmar looking for trouble. Pakistan is bankrupt. Nepal government faces great uncertainties and keeps nodding to notes from China. Delicate and dedicated efforts are most needed at this hour to safeguard our security, diaspora and our development as well.

Jayasivakumar SP, Chennai

TREAT WOMEN ATHLETES WITH RESPECT

While the 2024 guidelines of the IOC underline that every person, irrespective of gender identity or sex variations, has the right to practice sport without discrimination and in a way that respects their health, safety, and dignity, it is disheartening that the victories of a few female athletes have been treated with contempt because they do not conform to the traditional image of a female athlete. Algerian boxer Imane Khelif and Taiwan's Lin Yu-Ting have repeatedly been let down at the Paris Olympics, from opponents refusing the basic courtesy of a post-match handshake to celebrities ranging from former US President Donald Trump to entrepreneurs dismissing their victories. For athletes like Khelif, a biological woman with an XY chromosome and high testosterone, and Indian athlete Dutee Chand, with hyperandrogenism, a path to dignity, acceptance, and recognition remains long and arduous.

M. Jeyaram, Sholavandan

The writer is an independent commentator on political and security issues

Zahid Hussain



Did close ties between India & Hasina fuel Dhaka anger?

People's power has toppled one more authoritarian regime. Another bloody day in Bangladesh ended in triumph for the uprising in that country. Defying a nationwide curfew, hundreds of thousands of people came out onto the streets, bringing an end to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed's back-to-back 15-year rule. The military has now taken charge, putting in place an interim administration. But can this end the political turmoil that has shaken the South Asian nation? The situation continues to unfold.

It all started with protests by students against a controversial job quota system, which soon turned into a mass movement against a regime that, under Ms Hasina Wajed, had secured a fourth straight term in office a few months ago through a controversial electoral exercise. The government had virtually established a one-party system. The enforcement of draconian laws had turned Bangladesh into an authoritarian state.

But student protests broke the fear. The use of coercive power by the administration to crush the demonstrations exacerbated the anger. Hundreds of protesters were killed by the security forces, turning the streets into battlegrounds. Bangladesh has not witnessed such violence in its over 50-year history. The protests broke the myth of the Hasina Wajed government's invincibility.

Within weeks, it turned into a mass uprising, breaking the hold of an authoritarian regime. It united all kinds of Opposition forces. The events of the past weeks also exposed the fault lines in the system. It was an implosion waiting to happen. It just needed a trigger, which was provided by the student protests. The allocation of 30 per cent of government jobs to families of freedom fighters had been abolished following protests in 2018, but was restored this year. It was seen as a move to pack institutions with Awami League loyalists.

It was not just the political repression and worsening human rights situation, but also the rising cost of living and growing unemployment among the youth that fuelled the unrest. Not surprisingly, Gen Z has been at the vanguard of the movement that ultimately led Hasina Wajed to step down and flee the country. Although Bangladesh has been one of the fastest-growing economies in the region over the past many years, the gap between the haves and have-nots has also widened there. Inflation, which touched double digits in recent months, has also fuelled discontent.

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Hasina won the 2008 elections, which took place after two years of a military-backed "technocratic government". This phase marked her authoritarian grip over power. She jailed her opponents, including her main rival, Khaleda Zia. Her government executed many Opposition leaders after dubious trials for being "collaborators" during Bangladesh's war of independence.

Her party won four successive elections, all marred by allegations of rigging. The last elections held in January this year were boycotted by the main Opposition parties. It reportedly saw the lowest turnout of voters in the country's history. Human Rights Watch said the country's prisons were full of Opposition activists arrested in a crackdown before the elections.

With virtually no presence of the Opposition parties in Parliament, it paved the way for a one-party system. The recent elections marked the beginning of the downfall of Hasina Wajed's rule. What happened in Dhaka this week, with angry mobs ransacking the former Prime Minister's residence and destroying statues of Mujibur Rahman, was a manifestation of the public rage against authoritarianism. The spectacle of uncontrolled mobs ruling the streets in the absence of

any leadership has been alarming.

Notwithstanding the destruction of the democratic process, Bangladesh saw unprecedented economic growth during her rule. From a basket case, Bangladesh emerged as a model for Third World countries. The country also fared well in human development indicators. Yet, the economic slowdown of recent months and spiralling inflation raised questions about medium- and long-term economic prospects, adding to the social and political unrest.

Hasina Wajed's rule saw Dhaka becoming very close to New Delhi. Her party's association with it goes back to India's role in the 1971 war. Hasina Wajed's exile in India after the assassination of her father also brought her closer to the Indian leadership. But her pro-Indian stance drew criticism from the Opposition, particularly the religious parties. In her ouster, New Delhi has lost a close regional ally.

The Bangladesh Army, which has now taken control of the country, has a long history of coups. It is now becoming increasingly clear that the military will back an interim government comprising technocrats. However, it remains to be seen if such an arrangement can work in the highly volatile situation.

—By arrangement with Dawn

Opinion

FRIDAY, AUGUST 9, 2024



ACCOUNT OF EXPENSES

Rashtriya Janata Dal MP Manoj Jha

“Legal guarantee on MSP is a huge issue. A government which gives an account of expenses made on athletes in Parliament...It has no shame...An account should be given of how much taxpayer's money is spent on the PM and the Cabinet ministers

Buying time

The monetary policy tone is hawkish as RBI wants to have a better sense of the kharif crop and food prices

CONTRARY TO EXPECTATIONS that it might soften its stance with the US Federal Reserve expected to tighten its policy more aggressively, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) made it clear in its bi-monthly monetary policy on Thursday that it would be guided more by domestic considerations. At the same time, the RBI's tone was a tad more hawkish as it chose to underpin its move to not loosen monetary policy, or alter its “withdrawal of accommodation” stance, citing that food inflation was turning out to be “stubborn”. The central bank would like to see food prices settle down sustainably as they have been persistent rather than transitory. It believes that disregarding food inflation could result in households' expectations becoming unanchored which, in turn, could spill over to wages and core inflation, which has remained soft.

In fact, while the inflation forecast for FY25 was retained at 4.5%, the projection for the second quarter was raised by a fairly sharp 60 basis points (bps) to 4.4%, while for Q3, it was upped slightly to 4.7%. Governor Shaktikanta Das believes the pace of disinflation is uneven and, therefore, the 4% target is some time away. Having altered its assessment of neutral real rates from 0.8-1% to 1.4-1.9%, the central bank has given itself the space to keep rates unchanged. While all of this may be justified, the central bank's hawkish stance probably also has something to do with concerns around the high credit-deposit ratios at several lenders resulting from the gap between the growth in deposits and loans. Although risk weights for unsecured and personal loans were tightened last November, and credit to these segments has moderated, Das expressed concerns on “top-up loans”.

Also, there are worries over potential structural liquidity issues at banks. Lowering policy rates at this juncture, or allowing excess liquidity in the system, could drive funds to unproductive segments at a time when household savings are moving away from deposits. What's helping the central bank is the abundant liquidity in the system of more than ₹2.5 trillion with government spending having resumed. Overnight rates have fallen some 20-25 bps since June and are near 6.5% levels. Bond yields, in general, have remained benign and are expected to stay at sub-7% levels. In fact, the central bank has been trying to pull out some of this liquidity but has refrained from putting out a calendar for open market operations.

The central bank also seems comfortable with growth; the GDP growth forecast for FY25 of 7.2% is higher than what most economists have forecast and higher than the 6.5-7% range assumed in the Economic Survey. The comfort is, however, mystifying given that private consumption — accounting for 56% of the economy — grew at just 4% in FY24. In fact, the GDP forecast for Q1 has been moderated to 7.1% on the back of some high-frequency indicators that indicate lower-than-anticipated corporate profitability. While rural demand may be picking up, it is far from meaningful. Importantly, sales of commercial vehicles (CVs) at Tata Motors have contracted or grown marginally in all but one of the nine months to July: CVs are a cyclical indicator and the numbers signal the possibility of a slowdown. The RBI, it seems, is buying time till it has a better sense of the kharif crop and food prices. Even if policy rate cuts materialise in December, the quantum would be small.

The S&P always looks good next to European stocks

WHEN MARKETS GYRATED at the turn of the month, US and Japanese stocks had the cushion of an earlier surge to fall back on. In Europe, the rout hit share prices that had been weakening since May. An earnings season dominated by pessimism from many of the region's bosses has vindicated investors' caution.

The change in tone is stark after first-quarter results statements had sounded encouraging. The European Central Bank's rate cut in June also underpinned expectations that the region might be on the cusp of an economic upturn, even as investors digested political surprises in France. But before the mid-year reporting season even started, a spate of profit warnings reset the mood — notably from industrial firms including Airbus SE and Carl Zeiss Meditec AG and consumer-facing companies such as Burberry Group Plc, H&M Hennes & Mauritz AB and Deutsche Lufthansa AG. These were to prove a taste of worse to come.

European corporations didn't perform that badly in the second three months of the year. They're generally growing sales again after several successive quarters of declines. Profit margins also have been strong. So when it comes to earnings, more companies have beaten forecasts than missed them. The financial services sector has led these positive surprises.

But the comments on the outlook have given pause. The repeated message is that customer demand is weak, in particular from China — a key market for the luxury, automotive, semiconductor, chemicals, and commodities industries. With the US slowing too, “the nascent European recovery is vulnerable, again, to external forces”, analysts at UBS Group AG warned last month. That pattern is clear in the stark underperformance of UBS's index of China-exposed European stocks, including luxury and automotive firms.

The pricing power that many companies enjoyed as economies reopened after the pandemic, with consumers rushing to spend and supply chains still gnarled, has faded. A hoped-for recovery is on hold in the so-called consumer discretionary sector and appears only partially underway in what should be the more resilient consumer staples industry. Wednesday's updates from sneaker maker Puma SE and ad giant WPP Plc, citing weak Chinese demand, just reinforced the trend.

Roughly 40 companies have cut guidance this earnings season, more than double the number at the first-quarter stage, according to analysts at Bank of America Corp. Investors have often sold more resilient stocks to lock in profits, and the overall data from European companies has failed to provide the catalyst needed to push valuations higher, says Bloomberg Intelligence.

It should be no surprise then that estimates for European earnings in the third quarter have ticked down — as they have for 2024 as a whole. Indeed, UBS strategists anticipate earnings growth will be zero this year and next.

The bull case for European stocks is that they are still cheap relative to the US when priced relative to predicted net profit. The defensive qualities of the low-growth UK market could also come into favour now if stock market volatility continues.

But this recent history, coupled with the equity market turmoil, is a particularly unhelpful backdrop for deal activity in Europe. The Stoxx Europe 600 index is now only just in positive territory this year, while the S&P 500 is still up around 10%. When shareholders suffer very large losses on multiple single stocks, as they have done in these last few weeks, it can make them especially risk averse. The narrative from the C-suite is hardly going to inspire investors to take a punt on potential initial public offerings like aspiring debutant Shein, the fast-fashion retailer.

Investors in the US may feel like they're having a terrible time. They only have to look at Europe to feel better.

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INFLATION OUTLOOK WILL LARGELY BE SHAPED BY FOOD INFLATION TRAJECTORY AND BASE EFFECT

Reading between the lines

CANDOUR, A HALLMARK OF the current Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor, has been a push factor for markets to stay focused on growth and regulatory innovations. It continued unfettered today as the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) achieved a significant feat of a half-century of deliberations in its rather brief sojourn since 2016.

The governor's emphasis remained on the skewed probability of downside risks gaining currency, as the choppiness in global markets can foretell. This was even when the fragmented MPC (4-2) pledged support to keep the policy rates unchanged the ninth time in a row, in line with broader market expectations. An interesting observation in this regard could be the frenzied buoyancy in the calls for the US Federal Reserve to take a significant pivot, either through an off-cycle rate cut or cutting the Federal funds rate by as much as 50 basis points (bps) in its ensuing September meet. This is when the lopsided job markets (full- and part-time) as well as the spike in joblessness across whites and Asian sub-groups alike is creating a ripple effect globally. In addition to this, the US government has run up deficits of \$9 trillion in the last four years, including the most recent \$1.7 trillion, while interest on the debt is now shockingly more than the national defence expenditure. This limits fiscal flexibility and increases economic uncertainty, as carry trades are greatly leveraged globally. The sell-off in risky assets is nudging a vicious cycle to take off.

The instability could prime other central banks too, with the ensuing European Central Bank's meet in September being dubbed “wide open” by market watchers. Bank of Japan unnerved the markets last week through whiplashing currency traders and hiking its policy rate. To cut a long story short, the choices before most of the

SOUMYA KANTI GHOSH

Member, 16th Finance Commission and Group Chief Economic Advisor, State Bank of India



central banks suddenly appear between a fire or a frying pan, with hurried action and little communication likely to fan more panic among markets/investors.

Against this backdrop, Mint Street walked a razor-thin line, balancing the two sides of the coin as food inflation remains volatile and sticky, and an intense pan-India monsoon spell does not help in even spatial distribution. The trade front looks hazy, with supply-side issues possibly aggravating if economies undergo a slowdown, doubling down on the catastrophic effects of a flaring Middle East.

The RBI retained its inflation projection for FY25 at 4.5% and real GDP at 7.2%. The outlook for inflation will largely be shaped by the food inflation trajectory and base effect.

The RBI has been actively managing liquidity through main and fine-tuning operations and has ensured liquidity remains adequate. The impending just-in-time mechanism that keeps government cash balances out of the banking system could have an impact on liquidity. Furthermore, capital flows in FY25 could pose challenges and opportunities for the RBI's liquidity management. The RBI thus needs to innovate on liquidity management, especially given the pressure on the rupee.

The regulator has now shifted its action to online digital lending apps (DLAs). With a view to provide informa-

tion and differentiate between genuine lending apps and otherwise, the RBI has decided to create a public repository of DLAs deployed by regulated entities that will be available on the RBI website. This is expected to put some check on the digitalised loan shark business.

The RBI has also decided to alter the frequency of reporting to credit information companies, shortening it from the present 30 days to 15 days. This is expected to give a more up-to-date picture of a borrower's indebtedness. Lenders will be able to make better risk assessments for borrowers and also reduce the risk of over-leveraging by them.

By addressing the likelihood of building up of risks in the system from different known-unknown quarters, the regulator has sent a clear and present message to faltering entities to set their houses in order. While hailing the fall in unsecured credit flows via non-banking financial companies/ credit card issuers, the regulator has also warned of a focus on top-up loans attached to otherwise secured loans, viz. housing/gold, which are eventually finding ways in speculative purposes.

Among other measures, the RBI has proposed to increase the UPI limit for tax payments from ₹1 lakh to ₹5 lakh after it hiked the limit to ₹5 lakh from certain payments in December 2023. The transaction limit for the Retail

The concerns on stable, retail-led deposit accretion to banks should see the stakeholders ramping up efforts to reward the average depositor

Direct Scheme and IPO subscriptions was also increased to ₹5 lakh in December 2021. The hike in the limit will help taxpayers pay higher tax liabilities quickly and sans expenses, as the payments made via UPI usually do not attract any additional charges. Self-assessment tax is around 7% of the total gross direct receipts.

The RBI has also announced the introduction of delegated payments via UPI, which would allow an individual to set a UPI transaction limit for another individual on the primary user's bank account. This implies that an individual will be able to provide access to their bank account for UPI payments to another individual, say a family member. This is in line with the add-on card facilities provided by credit card companies and is expected to add to the reach and usage of digital payments across India. The RBI has proposed to transition the Cheque Truncation System from the current approach of batch processing to continuous clearing with “on-realisation-settlement”, which will reduce from the present duration of T+1 days to a few hours, helping customers release their value quickly in an otherwise stagnant sector.

The concerns on stable, retail-led deposit accretion to banks should see the stakeholders ramping up efforts to reward the average depositor through efficient and effective mechanisms. However, this would also imply a fair tax treatment for bank deposits, in line with other competing asset classes by policymakers. Interestingly, UPI transactions are also ensuring that stable current account savings account deposits are moving across the banking system, as such deposits are mostly used for transaction purposes. Clearly, deposit mobilisation will remain a challenge for the banking system, with the overall lending pie also subject to regulatory checks.

Views are personal

Keeping tabs on global events



PRASANNA BALACHANDER SAMEER NARANG

Respectively head-treasury and head-economics research group, ICICI Bank

The MPC should be able to assess the impact of the global slowdown and market volatility by December, when the trajectory of food inflation will be clearer

THE RESERVE BANK of India (RBI) kept interest rates and stance unchanged in this policy as expected. While the governor re-emphasised bringing inflation towards the target on a durable basis, the downward revision in near-term growth and upward revision in inflation estimates tells us the RBI is assessing the recent turn in domestic and global events. Even so, the global backdrop has changed much more than the domestic economic situation and that should give the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) room to change its stance in December.

Global growth is holding up but some moderation is visible with trade seeing an upturn that benefitted Indian exports, which have picked up pace with services continuing to expand. However, US services are decelerating from a high pace, as visible in weaker job addition and a rising unemployment rate. This should help align US inflation towards the target and weaker growth should give the Fed room to cut by 75 basis points (bps) this year. An additional factor supporting rate cuts is the increase in financial volatility in the last few days, which has impacted equity market returns and thus should have an impact on consumer confidence.

The RBI has revised its near-term growth for Q1 lower by 20 bps to 7.1% while keeping FY25 growth at 7.2% as a result of muted corporate earnings and lower government capex because of elections. While government capex should pick up, lower global commodity prices are

a positive for corporate margins. ICICI Bank's high-frequency economic activity index also shows growth should be around 7% with most indicators sustaining a positive momentum. A bigger change in India's growth momentum this year is the pick-up in agriculture growth on the back of good rainfall which has driven higher sowing and should boost rural incomes — already visible in higher fast-moving consumer goods and two-wheeler sales.

India's capex-led growth is likely to continue with private sector capex likely to see an improvement with capacity utilisation already at 76.8% — the highest in 11 years — and government expenditure remaining capex-oriented despite fiscal consolidation. Real estate upcycle is also continuing with record low inventory, but the impact of recent change in capital gains is yet to be seen even as the government has grandfathered purchases made before the Budget.

While near-term growth estimate has been revised lower, Q2 and Q3 inflation estimates have been revised higher from 3.8% and 4.6% to 4.4% and 4.7% respectively. The increase is driven by vegetable prices, which rose 14% in June over May and have continued to increase in July when telecom tariffs were raised by 10-27%, and will have an impact on headline

inflation. The RBI has revised its March-end inflation estimate downwards to 4.3%, hinting that it expects these inflation shocks to dissipate in two quarters and good rainfall to lower food inflation over the next year.

Amid the discussion around how effective monetary policy can be in reducing food inflation, the governor emphasised that high food inflation adversely affects household inflation expectations, which have seen an increase since November 2023 and is a sign of transmission of persistently high food inflation. However, in our view, slowing global growth and commodity prices is a positive for core inflation outlook when a good monsoon should lead to lower food inflation and thus help drive headline inflation closer to the target next year.

While the stance has been kept unchanged in this policy, liquidity conditions have changed from deficit in June — due to the build-up of government balances with advance tax and goods and service tax collections — to surplus in July and August because of government spending. The RBI has undertaken variable rate reverse repo operations to absorb excess liquidity since July. Undertaking faster than estimated fiscal consolidation, the Centre has reduced its short-term bor-

rowing by ₹1 trillion from the interim Budget. This has led to a 25-bps fall in T-bill yields compared with a 15-bps decline in a 10-year yield since the last policy. A similar steepening bias is visible in the US where short-end yields have fallen more than long-end ones because markets are now pricing in more than a 100-bps rate cut by December. The RBI has been undertaking open market operation (OMO) sales to reduce the extent of durable liquidity, which has increased because of its FX intervention when seasonally demand for currency is weak, but on an incremental basis currency demand and FX intervention is far more balanced in H2. This implies the RBI may not have to do OMO sales. This, along with the demand for bonds due to index inclusion and lower global yields when net supply of long-end bonds is limited and remains so given the Centre's fiscal consolidation road map, bodes well for the outlook on yields. But the same cannot be said for deposits considering the enduring gap between credit and deposit implies that upward pressure on term deposit rates should continue.

The MPC should be in a position to assess the domestic impact of the global slowdown and volatility in financial markets by December, when the trajectory of food inflation will be clearer. It would be an opportune time to change stance and look at cutting rates when the Fed would have undertaken two rate cuts and look at a few more with a slow economy that will impact global growth too.

While the stance has been kept unchanged in this policy, liquidity conditions have changed from deficit in June to surplus in July and August

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MPC holding steady

The central bank's decision to maintain the repo rate at 6.5% was influenced by the need to keep inflation under control, supporting economic growth, and monitoring external factors such as global commodity prices. The Reserve Bank of India also observed banks' healthy balance sheets and overall financial stability in its policy decisions. It has implemented several measures to

foster financial stability and promote economic growth amidst global uncertainties. These include maintaining a steady repo rate to strike a balance between inflation control and growth support. These measures demonstrate the RBI's commitment to financial stability and sustaining economic growth. This shows that the central bank is working to overcome the challenges posed by global economic uncertainties. —CK Subramaniam, Navi Mumbai

Welcome restoration

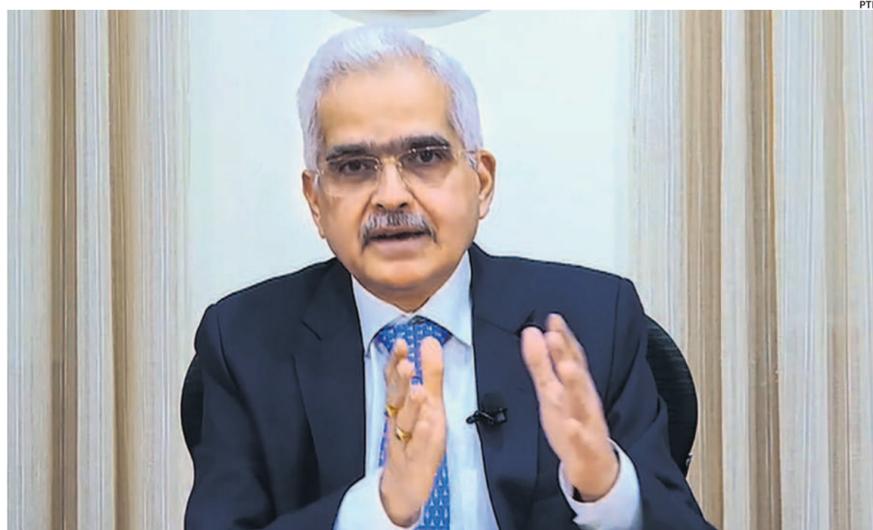
The restoration of indexation in computing long-term capital gains is welcome, as it was litigation-free and a realistic valuation process to assess the value of sold property. The capital gains provisions facilitate asset monetisation and wealth creation, so a positive approach is always desired. The investment limits in Section 54EC should be substantially enhanced and the period of holding bank deposits in

the capital gains scheme should also be enhanced. Several people don't need to invest in the properties or any other assets after sales of their movable and immovable properties subject to capital gains, so they should also be given a lucrative choice and alternative to investments for a certain period to seek deductions from capital gains. —Vinod Johri, Delhi

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OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS



The government's job creation plans reveal a flawed approach

Public expenditure should aim to lift incomes more directly instead of relying on private employers



HIMANSHU
is associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi

How come RBI's policy stance has not budged?

Its focus on price stability even as exchange rate volatility risks loom is fine, but it still hasn't shifted its policy stance to 'neutral.' Has the economy's savings-investment fulcrum changed?

Even as the US central bank seems set to pivot to monetary easing soon, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) appears in no hurry to do likewise. Its Monetary Policy Committee's (MPC) decision on Thursday showed no sign of softening its inflation focus. Not only did it leave the central bank's repo rate—through which it modulates short-term lending to regular banks—unchanged for the ninth successive time at 6.5%, it hasn't budged on its long-held "withdrawal of accommodation" stance. The anxiety revealed stems from high food inflation, which puts its headline inflation outlook at risk. According to official data, the rate of food inflation climbed to 8.4% from a year earlier in June, compared with 7.9% in May, mainly due to a sharp increase in the prices of vegetables and edible oils, and it has now averaged 8% since November. With nearly half of India's retail inflation basket made up of food items, this meant that the overall consumer-price reading took a U-turn. Its year-on-year incline was 5.1% in June after averaging 4.8% over the previous two months. So far, so clear.

"The MPC may look through high food inflation if it is transitory; but in an environment of persisting high food inflation, as we are experiencing now, the MPC cannot afford to do so," Governor Shaktikanta Das said. Various factors suggest that food-price pressures might be here to stay. Were RBI to ignore these and seek price stability without taking food and fuel into account (core inflation is just above 3%), it would risk spillovers and second-round effects, only to achieve a Pyrrhic victory against our rising cost of living, a battle it has waged since 2022. Therefore, RBI is likely to stay hawkish until retail inflation is durably squashed to its

4% target. How soon that happens may hinge on the rest of the monsoon season's rains and farm supplies. Thankfully, the economy's growth is not a worry, which means RBI is under no pressure to take its eyes off inflation. The central bank sees economic expansion at 7.2% in 2024-25 amid steady urban consumption and improving rural demand, even as investment is strong. The latter two have been concerns, but its broad optimism is backed by a spiffy services-sector performance, high GST collections and other supportive data. That said, global conditions could yet turn adverse.

While RBI's domestic focus is justified, its course could soon diverge from that of the US Federal Reserve, which is widely expected to ease rates next month. That could shake the external stability of the Indian rupee, should it impact capital flows. A wider rate gap with the US may draw more debt money into our assets, while equity zest in the West sparked by a Fed rate cut could see stock-market outflows, unless US recession fears dampen it. Though these drivers might balance out evenly, RBI could find the rupee's 'managed float' being tested and its liquidity control stretched. What seems odd in all this is RBI's stance. Since it's not yet neutral, despite its 4.5% inflation forecast for 2024-25, it signals a negligible chance of a quick pivot. Could RBI's sticky stance imply credence being given to a post-pandemic upward shift in the real rate of interest (adjusted for inflation) that optimizes growth and price stability? A recent RBI research report lays out such a possibility. In theory, broad neutrality is achieved by a rate that balances investments with savings in an economy. The actual picture is usually more complex. Whatever RBI's view, a pivot in line with America's looks unlikely.

The budget presented last month rightly seeks to address the issue of job creation, given the crisis on hand. Its grand announcements are the first sign of the government recognizing its severity. But the approach and measures proposed fail to address the issue.

The budget announced a ₹2 trillion package for employment and skilling, with the aim of creating 41 million jobs in the next five years. Under it, there are three schemes for job creation and one each for internship and upgradation of ITIs. The employment-linked scheme for first-timers promises to pay ₹15,000 to every new employee in three instalments. The second scheme is primarily for the manufacturing sector and proposes incentives for employees and employers with graded payments for four years. The third scheme is a subsidy to the employer, with the government contributing ₹3,000 per month as part of the employer's provident fund contribution.

While all three schemes are for enterprises registered with the Employees' Provident Fund Organization (EPFO), thus catering only to the organized sector, the conditions for availing the scheme are onerous and likely to work as a disincentive. The first scheme makes it conditional on the employee to attend an online financial literacy programme to get the subsidy for the second month. There is no rationale for

such a requirement. It also stipulates that the employer must return the subsidy if the employee leaves the job within a year. Similarly, for the second scheme, the enterprise has to hire a minimum of 50 workers or 25% of its existing workforce to get the benefit. Further, this scheme is not for new enterprises, but only those with a three-year track record of EPFO contributions. Similar criteria are imposed on the third scheme. Some of these may have been designed for monitoring purposes, but they look set to place a financial and administrative burden on employers and thus defeat the purpose.

The scheme for internship in India's top 500 companies is no better. It is applicable to youth in the age group of 21-24 years currently unemployed and not pursuing education. It excludes meritorious students from premier institutions (or with professional qualifications). It also bars any youth whose family member is a taxpayer or working with the government at any level. Except for very low-skill roles, it is hard to imagine too many youth who would meet this stiff checklist.

While the overall budgetary allocation for the package is ₹2 trillion over five years, the pro-rata estimate of expenditure for the first year is only ₹28,000 crore. The actual budget esti-

mate is only ₹12,000 crore for creating 16 million jobs in the first year.

The real problem, however, is not the implementation design or meagre allocation, but the budget's over-reliance on the private sector for employment. Faced with a slowdown in the economy after 2016-17, the budget in 2019 had announced a massive tax subsidy to the private sector. As the *Economic Survey* points out, much of this was utilized by the corporate sector to increase profits and clean up balance sheets without any significant increase in their wage bill or employment creation.

The second problem is in the belief that employment creation is a standalone objective, independent of growth. In any economy, jobs are created in the process of growth as national output increases and/or investment takes place. At a time when the economy is going through a period of deficient demand amid income stagnation, it is unfair to blame private businesses for not generating employment or investing enough. Incentives for job creation are unlikely to be useful in the absence of economic stimulus to produce more.

The primary responsibility of greater employment has to rest with the government. The jobs crisis in India is not just about providing employment, but also decent employment with a basic living wage. These require the government to use public expenditure to raise the incomes of workers.

This process is faster when the income multiplier effect of such public expenditure is higher. An increase in spending in rural areas and the informal sector not only raises incomes, but also creates jobs, as these are labour-intensive fields. Also, given India's large deficiencies in education, health and other public services, creating public employment in these sectors would help bridge these gaps and improve worker productivity. It would also aid a large proportion of the marginalized and vulnerable population who may not benefit from schemes announced in the budget.

QUICK READ

The budget's employment-linked and other job creation proposals acknowledge a severe crisis but are too onerous to work and err by looking at job creation in isolation of economic growth.

India needs public expenditure in rural areas and the informal sector to boost incomes and thus demand. Outsourcing the task to the private sector with unrealistic schemes won't help.



JUST A THOUGHT

A leader's lasting value is measured by succession.

JOHN C. MAXWELL

MY VIEW | THE CORPORATE OUTSIDER

Shared leadership casts a shadow over conglomerates

SUNDEEP KHANNA



is a columnist and author of 'Cryptostorm: How India Became Ground Zero of a Financial Revolution'.

India's three largest conglomerates have a question mark hanging over them, one that dominates private conversations but is pointedly ignored in public utterances. Simply put, who will succeed Mukesh Ambani, Ratan Tata and Gautam Adani at the Reliance, Tata and Adani groups, respectively? None of the three has a clearly designated successor, with Adani being the latest to talk about shared leadership of the group going forward.

Over the last few years, the issue of succession has been brushed under the carpet of family councils, executive committees and other such formations. This lack of a central authority assumes a coalitional co-leadership that presupposes a perfectly rational collective mind, which is a denial of basic human nature. With family businesses in India extending their sway over the country's economy, any number of consultants and gurus can be found to dish out such seemingly pat solutions.

But evidence—anecdotal as well as

empirical—suggests that while ownership can be shared, when it comes to running multibillion-dollar groups with multiple businesses of high complexity, leadership-by-committee rarely works.

At the Hinduja group, the four brothers, Srichand, Gopichand, Prakash and Ashok Hinduja, signed a perfectly cordial agreement—that any asset belonging to any one of them belongs to them all. The fragility of the sentiment was tested soon enough, as the brothers' successors questioned its validity, leading to a bitter family feud. In November 2022, the family decided to smoke the peace pipe and settle its affairs out of court, but this came only after a lengthy and wasteful legal battle.

Similarly, at the erstwhile Ranbaxy group, Parvinder Singh's two sons, who were running the business jointly after their father's death, ended up engaged in a bitter and highly public blame-game once the unravelling of their fortunes started. The late Parvinder Singh himself had a running battle with his brothers, besides of course his infamous boardroom clash with his father Bhai Mohan Singh.

As Leo Tolstoy wrote in his novel *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Joint leadership is somewhat like that: when things are going well, no one has a problem. But the moment there's a bone of contention, rifts surface. Strangely, two of the three large Indian groups in question have had first-hand experience of the perils of contested leadership.

At Reliance, Dhirubhai Ambani would have thought the house he was leaving behind was in order, with his two sons running the business together. After all, there had never been any sign of discord between the brothers during his lifetime. It was only after his death that differences surfaced.

At Tata, it was even worse. While J.R.D. Tata clearly named Ratan Tata, a family member, as his successor, the various satraps of the group refused to accept his decision and Tata had to fight an attritional battle to assert his supremacy.

Both Reliance and Tata hit stable paths only after an undisputed leader took charge and stamped his singular

authority over the entire business group. That the problem runs deep can be seen from how a similar dilemma dogs other successful groups like Bharti Airtel, where again it isn't clear who among Sunil Mittal's two sons Shravini and Kavini and daughter Eiesha will succeed him.

Some experts have floated the idea of a Walmart-like structure for Indian family groups. The Walton family plays no operating role in the company and exercises its rights merely as a shareholder, while retaining only board-level oversight of the business.

While it is possible for India's business families to emulate that model, given the outsized roles of incumbents, it will be a tall order for their inheritors to detach themselves completely.

Tata, for instance, had already stepped aside as chairman of his group when he led the decision to oust his handpicked successor Cyrus Mistry. Even the latest development at Tata Trusts,

which owns 66% of Tata Sons and through it controls the various group companies, leaves scope for confusion. A high-powered four-member executive committee set up to oversee the Trusts includes Venu Srinivasan of the TVS group, Vijay Singh and Cyrus Mistry's first cousin Mehli Mistry, who is close to Ratan Tata. But with Tata as its chair, the key question still remains: Who will be his successor as the head of the all-powerful trusts?

At Reliance Industries, Mukesh Ambani's three children—Anant, Akash and Isha—have been given clear operating roles in the different businesses of the group, which would be fine if the three businesses they manage were independently listed companies with no cross-holdings. That's unlikely to happen, which means that there will always be the question of who takes the final decision when a group-level issue comes up.

Family businesses by their very nature need a clearly identified successor. The alternative is to fully professionalize such groups, leaving even the topmost roles to professional managers, with no intervention in how they run them. But that calls for the kind of distancing from the business that most Indian owners find difficult to achieve.

QUICK READ

The question of succession at the very top of family controlled business groups like Reliance, Tata and Adani is salient in private conversations but is ignored in public discussions.

Coalitional ideas of collective control have been floated by some observers but these seem rather unrealistic and going fully professional is an option that seldom suits family owners.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

RBI has wisely charted a course that's unique to India's economy

Amid divergent action from major central banks around the world, the Monetary Policy Committee wisely kept rates steady



MYTHILI BHUSHURMATHA
is a senior journalist and a former central banker.

A week is a long time in politics," said former British prime minister Harold Wilson, briefing journalists at the time of a sterling crisis. It was in the mid-1960s and Wilson was referring to the far-reaching fallout of the crisis.

Close to 60 years later, I could perhaps be pardoned for tweaking Wilson's quote to suit the world of macroeconomics. Going by the events of the past few days, a week could have been a long time in monetary policy. Except that, to its credit, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) chose to stay the course. Contrary to what many, especially market aficionados, were hoping.

Consider. Till just about a week ago, it was a given that RBI's rate-setting Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) would settle for a relatively pedestrian monetary policy statement. Sure, the six-member MPC already had two dissenters, Jayanth Varma and Ashima Goyal, both of who had argued (at the last meeting in June) for a reduction in the policy (repo) rate and a change in stance from 'focused on withdrawal of accommodation' to 'neutral.'

But the composition of the Committee—three members from RBI and three external members, combined with a casting vote given to RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das in the event of a tie—means the Governor's word usually prevails. And with Governor Das already on record that "it is too early to talk about an interest rate cut," given an "uncertain global economic environment and persistently high home consumer inflation," and reiterating that monetary policy has to be "clearly and unambiguously" focused on inflation, it was taken for granted that RBI would stay put.

But that was before US employment data came in last Friday showing significantly slower hiring and unemployment at its highest in nearly three years. When markets opened the following Monday, stocks fell not only in the US, but around the world, as investors zeroed in on signs of a slowing American economy, fuelling fears that the US Fed might have waited too long to cut rates.

Talk of the US heading into recession gained currency soon after. As did talk of a new Sahm rule, wherein a 3-month moving average of unemployment of 50 basis points higher than the lowest in the previous 12 months is taken as signalling the onset of a recession. That a Fed rate cut would come sooner than anticipated was the general view.

With that, market expectations of a *status quo* policy from our own MPC were suddenly upended. Market expectations (hopes?), as distinct from those of economists, shifted to a change in stance, or, at the very least, more dovish commentary.

In the event, the governor showed that RBI would not be held hostage by market expectations. On the contrary, he walked his oft-repeated talk that RBI's policy decisions are driven by domestic



considerations. Sure, no central bank, least of all an emerging economy's, can ignore the ramifications of Fed action. But apart from a passing mention of "global financial markets exhibiting volatility," Governor Das chose to focus on domestic factors: the strength of our macro-economic fundamentals that gives RBI the necessary policy space to focus on its primary responsibility: getting headline inflation to India's 4% target.

When pressed to comment on the conspicuous silence about last week's market turmoil in the Monetary Policy Resolution at the press conference later in the day, Governor Das was candid. "It would be premature to talk about a recession in the US," he said, refusing to be drawn any further, other than reiterating that RBI is "watchful of all incoming data from domestic and external sources."

He made it clear that RBI was not going to be deflected either by the fact that core (CPI excluding food and fuel) inflation at 3.1% in May-June touched a new low. Or by the debate triggered by the recent *Economic Survey's* suggestion that monetary policy should consider targeting inflation excluding food.

His caution is not misplaced. Apart from the fact that RBI's target is 'headline' and not 'core' inflation, there has been a pick-up in retail inflation to

5.1% in June, with the likelihood of a reversal in the expected moderation in the pace of disinflation (the second-quarter projection was revised upward from 3.8% in the June MPC note to 4.4%). Inflation is moderating, but, as Governor Das put it, the pace of disinflation is uneven and slow and there is still some distance before it aligns with the 4% target.

Second, high food inflation (food has a weight of 46% in the consumption basket) holds the possibility that it could spill over—economists call this 'second-order effects'—to other commodities and ultimately impact core inflation. Third, the public at large identifies with food rather than headline inflation. Fourth, high food inflation affects household inflation expectations, impacting not only the future trajectory of inflation, but also resulting in inflation getting entrenched or sticky.

The Governor was emphatic. The MPC can look through high food inflation if it is 'transitory.' But in an environment of persistent high food inflation, as at present, it cannot afford to do so. We paid the price (in common with other central banks, including the mighty Fed) for believing high inflation was 'transitory' in the aftermath of monetary policy easing during covid. We cannot afford to repeat that mistake.

QUICK READ

Markets shaken by fears of a US recession may have expected a more dovish approach by RBI but Governor Das made it clear that domestic considerations would drive Indian policy.

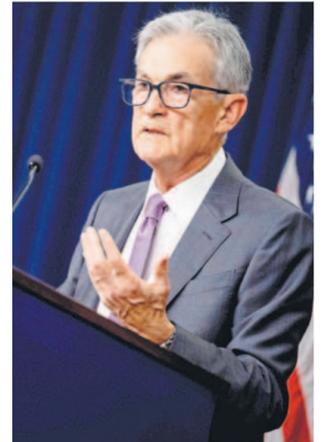
A price was paid for treating high inflation as 'transitory' in the aftermath of monetary policy easing during the covid pandemic and we cannot afford to repeat that mistake.

The US Fed must act to reduce rates swiftly—recession or not

The case for policy easing is clear even if the US economy holds up



CONOR SEN
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



Fed chair Jerome Powell's Jackson Hole speech is awaited keenly

America's weaker-than-expected jobs report last week has sparked a debate about whether its economy is sliding into recession or whether the rise in the unemployment rate in July was due to a continuing post-pandemic normalization of the labour market. Whichever camp you're in, the right move for the US Federal Reserve is to act with urgency, cutting its policy rate by a percentage point to 4.25%-4.5% by the end of 2024 in the name of risk management.

It's a level of easing that the Fed is likely to undertake even if the rise in unemployment ends up being somewhat benign, since we no longer need such restrictive rates to tame inflation. It makes sense to front-load those rate cuts rather than run the risk of being too slow to act to forestall worse economic outcomes.

If we really are heading into recession, there's not much disagreement on what the Fed should do: Cut interest rates a lot and fast. That's where market pricing has shifted after a rocky week of economic data. Interest rate futures suggest the Fed will cut its policy rate by over 200 basis points by the end of 2025, taking the Fed funds rate down near 3%. This seems reasonable, based on what we've seen in prior recessions.

It's the second scenario that is more challenging. The US joblessness rate has climbed this year from 3.7% to 4.3%, but the percentage of people between the ages of 25 and 54 who are employed has also risen, from 80.4% to 80.9%. That's an unusual dynamic with the unemployment rate reflecting, in part, rising labour force participation.

It's possible that the explanation of a gradual normalization is the correct one, that there's little risk of a rapid increase in unemployment, and that the Fed has time to be patient. But putting all of one's eggs in that basket is risky. The rate of layoffs is currently low, but waiting for job cuts to increase means waiting until it's too late to avoid a recession. During the financial crisis, for instance, layoffs didn't start to spike until the middle of 2008 once a recession was well underway. The hiring rate has already slumped to levels that suggest employers feel no compulsion to add to their payrolls.

In general, it's best not to overthink the unemployment rate. Inflection points in the economy are messy and uncertain by nature, and leaning too much into optimistic scenarios can cause severe policy errors. Former Fed Chair Ben Bernanke gave his "subprime is contained" speech in May

2007 when the housing market was already in the process of collapsing.

The central bank's job is risk management. It's why policymakers continued to increase interest rates in the first half of 2023 well over a year after their preferred measure of inflation had peaked and begun to decline. In June, the Fed's 'dot plot'—an anonymous collection of policymakers' rate expectations—showed a median projection for a 25-basis-point cut in 2024, followed by four more reductions in 2025, or 1.25 percentage points of easing overall. Both American labour market and inflation data have weakened since then. A revised dot-plot today would likely show more aggressive cuts, and we know from Chair Jerome Powell's comments on Wednesday that policymakers are prepared to lower rates in September.

So why wait? Inflation risks have moderated sufficiently, so the main argument against cutting more aggressively than they've previously signalled would be the risk that markets are alarmed by what that says about the economic outlook.

Fortunately, Jerome Powell can use his upcoming speech at the Kansas City Fed's conference in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to shape the narrative. Swift rate cuts would relieve pressure for Americans struggling to make payments on floating-rate credit card debt or to get financing for a new car. It would help the millions of homeowners who bought when mortgage rates were high, with refinancing at lower rates freeing up household budgets for other types of consumption. The main headwind for the economy right now is high borrowing costs.

Foot dragging among policymakers harkens back to the economic situation and Fed debate from early 2022. At the time, the dispute was over whether inflation was transitory, and whether raising interest rates by 25 basis points once a quarter would be too fast. Ultimately, inflation got worse and the Fed had to respond aggressively. Many economists now believe that delay in raising rates was a mistake. Now, we're in the opposite situation with a cooling labour market. The Fed has already signalled a likelihood of cutting rates at the September meeting. Policymakers lose little and have much to gain by moving quickly.

MY VIEW | PEN DRIVE

Altman's \$7 trillion AI ask: How else to save the world?

SAMIRAN GHOSH



is a technology advisor and podcast host.

In a world where billionaires launch into space for fun, Sam Altman of OpenAI fame has upped the game of one-upmanship by throwing a number into the universe that has made economists and mathematicians do a collective face-palm: \$7 trillion. That is not a typo. It is seven trillion US dollars, a number so large that it's practically a black hole in the world of finance that makes most tech-startup pitches look like lemonade-stand business plans.

Sam Altman has said he needs \$7 trillion. Why? According to reports, he is on a mission to build a global network of AI chip factories, data centres and power plants. Apparently, training the next generation of AI models requires more computing power because they may need to solve a Rubik's cube while juggling flaming torches, riding a unicycle and translating Tolstoy's *War and Peace* into Klingon. These models will attempt to understand the nuances of human language in all its glory, including why we say

"parkway" when we drive on it and "drive-way" when we park on it. Hence, all the costs.

Is it needed? Some experts argue that this level of investment is key to keeping up with the exponential growth of AI capabilities. Others suggest Altman accidentally added a few extra zeros to his funding estimate.

So, how much is \$7 trillion? It's enough to do plenty else. I could suggest a few ideas. *Cost: \$1.5 billion per skyscraper.*

Or we could build around 4,600 Burj Khalifa skyscrapers like the one in Dubai. *Cost: \$1.8 trillion by 2030; Faist-group: \$1.81 trillion by 2030; and MarketsandMarkets: \$1.4 trillion by 2030.* Altman's request is about 3.8 times this entire projected market.

Now, I do not want to be a 'frivolous Sam' (my call name used to be Sam when I was at IBM—no idea why). So, I took it upon myself to figure out some 'more worthy causes' that might deserve this money.

Global hunger and malnutrition: \$2.65 tril-

lion (for 10 years at \$265 billion annually). This figure comes from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's estimate of funds needed to end hunger by 2030. I have allocated funding for ten years, as this would create a sustainable impact.

Climate-change mitigation: \$2.4 trillion based on the IPCC's estimate of annual investments needed in the energy sector until 2035 to limit global warming to 1.5° Celsius. I have allocated one year's worth of this estimate, though the challenge requires ongoing investment.

Universal access to clean water and sanitation: \$570 billion (five years at \$114 billion per year). The World Bank estimates that \$114 billion annually is needed to achieve universal access to safely managed water and sanitation services by 2030. I provided five years of funding to make significant progress.

Universal healthcare: \$1.11 trillion (three years at \$370 billion per year)

based on a rough global estimate of \$371 billion annually for basic universal health coverage. Three years of funding could help establish systems in many countries.

Clean energy transition: \$270 billion. The balance amount. IRENA suggests a complete energy transition will require \$131 trillion by 2050. So this amount, while significant, is only a fraction of what's needed.

Is this adequate? In most cases, far greater allocations are needed to solve these issues. However, experts believe these estimates would help us make significant progress, or, in some cases, achieve specific goals (like ending hunger by 2030).

While a \$7 trillion AI chip manufacturing ecosystem sounds impressive and may even be an urgent need for Planet Earth, it's worth considering whether we might get more bang for our buck elsewhere.

But who knows? Maybe this super-AI will solve all these problems for us. Remember that we once thought 640KB of RAM was more than anyone would ever need. Perhaps in the future, we'll look back at Altman's request and chuckle. "Only \$7 trillion? How quaint!"—right before our AI overlords ask us to solve another CAPTCHA to prove we're human.

QUICK READ

Sam Altman's \$7 trillion plan for an AI support ecosystem of chip factories, data centres, power plants and more makes most tech-startup pitches look like lemonade-stand business plans.

This sort of money could fund Nasa for 250 years or build 4,600 Burj Khalifas, but we could also wipe out hunger, mitigate climate adversities, invest in clean energy and go for universal healthcare.

Is Indian cricket 'spinning' away from the craft?

Less than six weeks from winning a heart-stopping thriller of a final at West Indies during the T20 World Cup tournament and barely ten days after blanking the hosts Sri Lanka 3-0 in a bilateral T20 series, Indian cricket team has hit a rare, hitherto unseen rough patch in the ODI format.

What has happened suddenly to this team, which has remained on top in both the formats for a long time now, with no real opposition seen from many opponents, least of all the island cricketers who have been at the receiving end for years together now?

An excerpt from a revealing re-

port on the renowned cricketing website Cricinfo says: 'This Sri Lanka team, ranked seventh in ODIs, who finished ninth in last year's World Cup and as such have not qualified for the Champions Trophy, who struggle to get their seam bowlers on the field, and who haven't made a global-tournament semi-final in 10 years, has asked some serious questions of an India side whose ambitions are world domination.'

Lording over world cricket affairs, owing to its financial clout, with fanatical followers of the game all over the globe and huge monetary deals as sponsorships and bids, Indian cricket is at the pinnacle of the game,

both figuratively and otherwise for a decade and more now.

For such a country to sustain its supremacy should not be, ideally an issue. Yet, the Indian cricket team has over the years faltered at the final stage in multinational tournaments after raising hopes of its die-hard fans. Recent examples are the ODI World Cup held at home and the World Test Championship, two times in a row.

Of course, with public memory being short, the recent triumph of the T20 tournament, which is the most popular among the fans all over, must have made them happy that their boys are back to their win-

ning ways. Till the recent crashing defeat at Colombo, where the locals whipped the visitors 2-0.

It is still not clear what the impact of interim coach Sanath Jayasuriya, the tormentor of Indian cricket teams for a long time nearly three decades ago has had on his younger colleagues. For sure, he enjoyed playing against the Indian cricket teams who were off-colour and saw themselves being outplayed during the 1996 World Cup.

He has to be credited for getting a rare bit of glory for the home team by defeating India convincingly in a format after 27 years. Coming on the back of the women's cricket team

also defeating India in the finals of the ACC Women's Asia Cup, the Lankan cricket fans have good reasons to feel delirious.

What is likely to be an area of concern for the Indian team would be the manner in which their young players, used to hitting and playing aggressively on tame pitches in 'masala' matches like IPL, flounder on really testing grounds where the ball does a lot of talking. To see the likes of Virat Kohli, who has had a terrible time in Lanka, face the island spinners like a rookie is surely a revelation. The writing is on the wall, everyone concerned needs to take note of this. Urgently.

LETTERS

Vinesh Phogat - A Victim of fighting against the System

THE Disqualification of Vinesh Phogat has come as a big blow to the hopes of millions of Indians who were sure of her winning the coveted Olympic Gold in Wrestling. Her journey from Jantar Mantar in Delhi to the Wrestling arena in Paris has been full of struggles. She took to the streets to protest against the then President of Wrestling Federation of India Brij Bhushan Singh and was overlooked for the 53Kg category by the WFI. Antim Pangal was chosen over her. She however qualified for the 50Kg category and gave it all she had in Paris Olympics. She endured a sleepless night and tried hard to lose that extra weight. She gave up Food and Water, tried Sauna and bicycling but as fate would have it fell short by just 100 gms. Whom should the blame squarely lie on? The WFI is responsible for making her forcibly contest in the 50Kg category, though her domain was 53Kg. They selected Antim Pangal based on the Asiad Trials and never gave a chance to Vinesh in the trials for 53Kg. We can certainly smell a conspiracy here. Her weight was not managed properly by her team of Nutritionists and as a result she was found 100gms overweight. The IOA could not do much for Vinesh. She is a victim of fighting against the "System". The entire Country stands by Vinesh Phogat today. She is a true Champion and is worth more than a Gold Medal. The Govt of India should award her a Gold medal for her achievements in Paris.

Parimala G Tadas, Madinaguda, Hyderabad

WOULD be the first Gold medal winner if Vinesh Phogat had not been disqualified. Just 100 gram difference occurs in any weighing machine. Anyway India has lost first gold. A two time World Championships bronze medalist in 53 kg has now taken a decision to quit from future competitions is yet another shock to the nation.

NSK Prasad, Hyderabad

Waqf Amendment Bill unconstitutional

THE tabling of the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024 in Parliament, now referred to a joint parliamentary panel, has for one more time shown the BJP's and the Modi government's obsession with matters pertaining to Muslims. Perhaps the BJP would lose its raison d'être and relevance if there were no Muslims for it to target in the pursuit of its politics. The ill-intent of the government in bringing in this Bill is clearly evident in the contents of the slew of amendments. A law should not be a ploy for transferring lands in the possession of Muslims to the Adanis and Ambanis of the world! The Bill provides for representation of non-Muslims in the central Waqf Council and the State Waqf Boards. By this logic, non-Hindus should get representation in organisations governing temples and owning temple properties! The mind boggles at the BJP's conception of 'inclusivity'. The Bill assigns a pivotal role to a 'full-time chief executive officer' as a government appointee and a government representative; it amounts to interference in the internal affairs of a religious community. The most consequential amendment is the one that repeals Section: 40 of the existing Act and strips the Waqf Board of its power to decide and declare if a property is a waqf asset or not and vests the power in the District Collector. It is a clear instance of implementing Hindutva agenda in the name of correcting past mistakes! The passage of the Bill, after scrutiny by a joint parliamentary panel, seems a distinct possibility, given that the BJP and its allies like the JD(U) and the TDP are on the same page on the issue. But then, it is inevitably likely to be struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional.

G David Milton, Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

A contentious bill to amend 44 sections of the Waqf Act of 1995 is nothing but peeping and interfering in ones religion. The Amendment is going to be done by BJP Government is totally unacceptable. Government knows very well that waqf board has lot of land in their hand and the intention is nothing but to grab the land. The government says it aim is to reform the registration process for Waqf properties through a centralised portal. But Muslims are frustrated about the bill and opposing it because the clear intention of bill is to sell land in the interest of BJP Party and its leaders. The meaning of Waqf itself is dedicating ones own property in the name of God for religious and charitable purposes. Waqf properties are private and self-acquired by the followers of Islam. Introducing the Waqf Bill in the name of reforms is nothing but cheating.

Zeeshan, Kazipet, Telangana

THIS is with reference to the controversial wakf board bill, introduced in the ongoing budget session. In this regard, what right does the non-Muslims or the government have, to administer the Muslim properties donated by rich Muslims to look after the poor Muslims? Is it not unnecessary interference in their religious matter? It is also an infringement on the religious freedom guaranteed under article 25 of the constitution. Instead the government, should restore all the grabbed Waqf lands to the Waqf board and ensure that waqf board efficiently undertakes charitable work for the uplift of poor Muslims, in the national interest.

PH Hema Sagar, Old Alwal, Secunderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Kuvempu inspired Pawan Kalyan to learn Kannada

BENGALURU: Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan has appreciated Karnataka Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre's love and commitment towards environment, nature and forest conservation. Speaking at a meeting held with the Forest Minister and the forest authorities in the Vidhana Soudha committee room, Andhra Pradesh DCM Pawan Kalyan said that he would congratulate Eshwar Khandre for his sentiments.

He said that there is a similarity in the script of Telugu and Kannada languages, citing the lines of national poet Kuvempu, "Before singing a song to the forest, I pause before my mind" and said that this meeting inspired him to learn Kannada. Having become a film actor, he referred to Kannada legendary actor Dr Rajkumar's film Gandhadagudi and said that the film conveyed the message of forest conservation. He said that he will discuss with the Chief Minister and take a decision in the cabinet to facilitate the devotees of Karnataka in Srisailem and Tirupati.

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

Good tenure is a precious blessing for a civil servant



LANKA VENKATA SUBRAHMANYAN

SOMETIMES, due to unfortunate reasons not attributable to the officer concerned that his/her transfer happens. Sometimes people presiding over the affairs of the state, think on our behalf and think of a 'better' posting all the same causing hardship to the officer only. I was extremely lucky that I spent three years fruitfully at Parvathipuram. Every time I was travelling to Hyderabad for official work I could visit Ananda Vanam in Bhimli and spend time with Pujya Guruji and also with my parents in Visakhapatnam. This was the closest place of posting that I did in my career geographically speaking to my place of upbringing. I then moved to Guntur as Joint collector. I had nice experience of becoming subordinate to my former deputy director in LBS Academy Musoorrie. I drove to that place in my Premier Padmini car with my wife and toddler son Aditya. Noticed that Guntur town was a big town and was buzzing with lot of people.

I will take few minutes to remind about the conversation that I was blessed to have with Jillellamudi Amma after my success at the combined civil services examination. Amma showered a palmful of white jasmies on my shaven head and blessed me.

She enquired from me about when it was likely that I can go to Guntur as Collector. She went further and said that it would be good to see me as Collector at Guntur. I was speechless and went into silence, sinking into her loving divine presence. She even fed me a few fistfuls of curd rice as a token of her love and affection. This conversation with Amma in 1983 flashed on my inner eye and I was sure that her words brought me to Guntur. I cannot narrate all those details here which cut short my stay in Guntur. One evening Sri Rosaiah called me to the R and B guesthouse and informs me about my impending transfer to Mahabubnagar. So to fulfill Amma's prophecy, I went as JC to Guntur and held charge of Collector Guntur for over three weeks.

Mahabubnagar district was one of the closest to state headquarters. It is commonly believed in the district that many government servants operated from Hyderabad. South Central Railways facilitated the employees to go to Mahabubnagar in the morning and return to Hyderabad by night traveling by Tungabhadra express. This district was second largest in the state and was divided into 64 mandals and four revenue subdivisions. Rural mandals were very poorly equipped with services of power and water. It is a well spread out district and is features in all the lists of concerns and challenges. If one looks at communally sensitive areas



Isn't it ironical that a district so close to state headquarters is beset with so many challenges. Even assured water supply was not there in district headquarters and as if these problems or challenges were not enough, Project Tiger was a fresh addition to that list. Chenchu tribe that was recording negative growth in population was facing the brunt of tigers in the Rajiv Gandhi national sanctuary in the Nallamalai forest area. These challenges welcomed me to Mahabubnagar district and I was happy to move there as Collector by end February of 1990. So in my seventh year I was the first one in my batch to hold district charge

or areas with problems of untouchability or places with left-wing extremism or villages caught in cycle of poverty due to drought etcetera, this district invariably finds a mention there. Isn't it ironical that a district so close to state headquarters is beset with so many challenges. Even assured water supply was not there in district headquarters and as if these problems or challenges were not enough, Project Tiger was a fresh addition to that list. Chenchu tribe that was recording negative growth in population was facing the brunt of tigers in the Rajiv Gandhi national sanctuary in the Nallamalai forest area. These challenges welcomed me to Mahabubnagar district and I was happy to move there as Collector by end February of 1990. So in my seventh year I was the

first one in my batch to hold district charge.

Government of Andhra Pradesh, launched 'Special Area Programme' (SAP) to tackle the problem of left wing extremism. This programme was to be implemented in all the mandals affected by that problem. Shri T Gopalrao a senior officer, holding a Secretary level post was coordinating this programme in my district. Sri Gopal Rao was like an elder brother and soon we struck an excellent working relationship. We spoke to each other on the phone and he suggested to jointly tour all the mandals and rejuvenate the Panchayat institutions. The launch of this programme happened at Achampet. Prior to the launch of SAP under auspices of the minister of district a meeting was convened with

relected MLAs of that area. All of them flew in rage at me, for preparing this SAP without consulting them. I was not able to convince them and was at a loss of words. Sri Gopal Rao came to my rescue by taking the entire blame for not consulting MLAs. I was dumbfounded with this care from my illustrious senior. The entire steam was let off by the MLAs and they readily agreed to Sri Gopal Rao's suggestion of going to general body meetings of all affected mandala praja parishads. Both of us traversed the district in a continuous manner and we halted for the nights in some school buildings avoiding far-off guest houses. There was so much for me to learn from Sri Gopal Rao when he addressed the MPP general body or spoke to youth in the villages.

I continued this habit of attending general body meetings of the MPPs and that gave me an excellent opportunity to understand the demands of the public representatives at cutting edge and also to assess the efficiency of my senior colleagues at the district level. Problems in the far flung Amrabad upper plateau were my natural priority to tackle. Groundwater was not tapped in these areas and only monsoon assisted crops were not creating surplus in the families. Also took steps to get hamlets notified as scheduled areas as revenue villages had lot of non-tribal population. Fresh from my ITDA experience, drove project staff in Mannanur, who

reluctantly started moving. Encouraged horticulture in tribal mandals supplying good plant material.

In those tours to these far-flung areas, I saw the dormancy in the behaviour of youth. There were large number of school and college dropouts in the villages. Presence of this youth was a threat to many sarpanches. So the 'Gram sabha' that was stipulated under the Jawahar Rojgar Yojana (JRY) were not being regularly conducted by the Sarpanches. Due to the threats from extremists, many public representatives stopped giving advance notice of visiting to their constituencies. All this meant grievance redressal came to a halt in the rural pockets. To galvanise the youth, we launched 'youth component plan' in the district. We earmarked 10% of funds made available under Drought Prone Area Programme (DPAP) to be spent through registered youth clubs. Secretary, Nehru Yuvak Kendra, Mr Khaleemullah was so dynamic and played such a crucial role in this programme. We also sensitised youth to the government initiatives in the district. We hoped to nurture next generation leadership through this special exposure. Evaluation done by Council for Social Development showed encouraging results from this initiative. Youth were weaned away from antisocial activities also. Tree plantation was taken up by youth clubs with these funds under DPAP.

Caste Census: An opportunistic politics for Congress

ANITA SALUJA

RAHUL Gandhi is persistently harping on the Caste Census. This has been his principal campaign theme during the Lok Sabha elections earlier this year. Rahul Gandhi pretty much stuck to the same theme even during his remarks while participating in the discussion in the Lok Sabha on the Union Budget.

Significantly, Rahul Gandhi's line is at sharp variance from the stand of not only the Congress, but also of the Congress Party's First Family, or the Nehru-Gandhi Family, which has ideologically opposed Reservations. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi never favoured the reservations route to help the weaker sections of society. Mahatma Gandhi, himself, never approved such an approach.

During the Constituent Assembly debates, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru expressed himself against Reservations. Only in the case of the Dalits, some measure of reservations was acceded to, because of the history of injustice to Dalits and Adivasis. But even that measure was meant only for a period of 10 years, making it clear that it was purely a temporary measure and not a permanent solution to the social problem.

Now, not only has a temporary measure been converted into a permanent arrangement, but reservation is being extended even on religious grounds. What is worse, reservation is being elevated into a policy instrument.

For the first time, Rahul Gandhi has openly taken the position to not only push for the idea of reservations, but also to escalate the reservations steeply, over and above the Supreme Court mandated cap of 50 per cent.

Rahul Gandhi seems to support reservations for Muslims under the garb of the Backward Classes among Muslims. In fact, when in the Undivided Andhra Pradesh, the then State Chief Minister Dr Y S Rajashekar Reddy pushed for 4 per cent reservation for OBCs among Muslims like the Ansari, it was being openly referred to by the Congress leaders as Muslims Reservations.

Does Rahul Gandhi see Caste Census and increased reservations for Dalits, Adivasis, Other Backward Classes and Minorities, who constitute nearly 80 per cent of the population, as the only weapon that can beat back the surging wave of Hindutva? Nothing else seems to explain the un-



seemly haste with which Rahul Gandhi is pushing for Caste Census.

The Congress is pressing for Caste Census because without data, it cannot initiate the process for increasing the percentage of reservations. Raising reservations for Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs and Minorities is being seen as the political trump card in what appears to be a hard-to-win political battle against Hindutva.

According to the Congress political managers, when the SCs, STs, OBCs and Minorities population is around 80 per cent, then reservations for them should be necessarily around 75 per cent. This surpasses the Supreme Court cap of 50 per cent on reservations. The Congress is pushing for legislation to remove the Supreme Court cap of 50 per cent on the reservations.

Participating in the discussion in the Lok Sabha on the Union Budget, Rahul Gandhi targeted the Modi Government. He declared that farmers, students and the middle-class were trapped in the lethal Chakravayuh formation of the legendary Mahabharat War. He also referred to its synonym, the Padmayuh, or Lotus-formation, with the pun on the BJP election symbol, which no one can break, except for the legendary Arjun. In fact, Arjun's son, Abhimanyu, is killed after being trapped in the Chakravayuh in the Mahabharat War.

Not stopping with his attack on the Budget proposals, Rahul Gandhi turned his focus on to the Budget Team. Referring to the pre-Budget Halwa Ceremony, Rahul Gandhi said there were no Dalits, Adivasis and OBCs in the Budget Team, who comprise a majority of the population, when the Halwa was being distributed.

The point he wanted to make loud and clear is that the Halwa is being cornered by a minuscule minority of the upper-castes, while the over-

whelming majority of the weaker sections did not get to have the Halwa.

Surprisingly, however, Rahul Gandhi's aggressive push for the Caste Census and for steeply raising Reservations to as high as 75 per cent, in order to reflect the social reality, finds no resonance within the Congress party. The Congress leaders are hardly enthused by Rahul Gandhi's personal pitch on Caste Census and making it the basis for steeply raising the reservations for the weaker sections of the society.

Historically and ideologically, the Congress has consistently been opposing caste-based and religion-based reservations.

Not merely during the Constituent Assembly debates but long after that, too, there was no change in the stand of Jawaharlal Nehru. For instance, the First Backward Classes Commission under Kaka Kalelkar, was established by a Presidential Order under Article 340 of the Constitution on January 29, 1953. In two years time, the Kalelkar Commission submitted its Report on March 30, 1955. But the Kalelkar Commission Report was never implemented.

In a letter dated June 27, 1961, Nehru expressed his reservations about the tradition of caste-based quotas and privileges and his dislike for any kind of reservation, more particularly in service. Nehru took the position that reservations could compromise efficiency and result in a nation that settles for mediocrity rather than striving for excellence.

During the Janata Party Government of Prime Minister Morarji Desai, the Mandal Commission was set up on January 1, 1979. The B P Mandal Commission Report was submitted on December 31, 1980, when Indira Gandhi was already back as the Prime Minister. She, too, did not act on the Mandal Commission Report.

Interestingly, one of her popular and catchy election slogans was, Na Jaat par, na paat par, Indira Ji ki baat par, mohar lagaye haath par (Neither on caste, nor on creed, but on Indira's word, cast your vote for the Hand symbol).

In August, 1990, when Prime Minister V P Singh announced his decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report, there was widespread backlash.

Apparently, even V P Singh used it for his own political expediency, more than to demonstrate his commitment to the ideal of social justice. As

BJP veteran L K Advani announced his decision to roll out the Ram Rath Yatra, V P Singh flashed the Mandal Card to counter the Kamandal Card.

Participating in a debate in Parliament on the Mandal Commission issue on September 6, 1990, Rajiv Gandhi opposed such hasty measures as reservations. Rajiv Gandhi insisted that the problem of social and educational backwardness cannot be solved by playing politics or by limited politically-motivated manipulations.

Rajiv Gandhi pointed out that the problems of backwardness are very real and there is no single way of tackling the problem. Education is required but it takes years and even so there is no guarantee that it washes away the problem. Similarly, financial assistance alone cannot remove backwardness. It will help, but it cannot be said with finality that only reservations will help achieve the goal.

Rahul Gandhi may find that Caste Census and increasing reservations may prove to be a powerful weapon to fight Hindutva. But it is doubtful whether he can really go far with such a political approach.

As someone passionately swearing by the Constitution, he cannot miss the point that this very Constitution does clearly differentiate between Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes. The founding-fathers and the framers of the Constitution did make such a distinction. One wonders why the political class is losing sight of that distinction today.

In fact, earlier in the Women's Reservation Bill, in the 33 per cent reservation for women, sub-quota was given to the SCs and STs. But the same could not be extended to the OBCs. The reason is that castes are not recognised in the Constitution.

Indeed, caste does count tremendously in the country. In a competitive democracy, caste tensions tend to get accentuated. But greater democracy can finally undermine and weaken the stranglehold of caste.

The legacy of the freedom struggle and the Constitution that fully reflects it, hold up the vision of a Casteless Society. In the hurly-burly of politics, one cannot lose sight of that hallowed ideal that can truly and completely transform Indian society.

(The writer is Delhi-based senior journalist and political commentator. Views are personal.)



The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Phogat: Not a medallist but a winner

Heroic achievements and heartbreaks are the very essence of sports. Wrestler Vinesh Phogat, 29, now exemplifies this like few before her have done. In the space of a single night, Phogat went from a possible gold on the 50-kg Olympic podium – which would have been India's feat too – to being disqualified. She returns from Paris without a medal despite having beaten the world number one, the unbeaten Yui Susaki, and being assured of an Olympic silver. Despite extreme measures such as cutting hair, sniping jersey, cycling for hours, sauna time, and willing to draw blood to reduce weight to below, she left the weigh-in spot with tears of devastation for the extra 100 grams she had. It was, for her and for India, the death of a dream, too heavy a heartbreak. The Indian contingent filed an appeal against the disqualification.

Phogat is a winner on and off the mat even if she is not the gold medallist she could have been. Not all victories are medals and trophies

Which ever way the story turns from here, Phogat is a winner on and off the wrestling mat even if she is not the gold medallist she could have been. Not all victories are medals and trophies; a few like Phogat's are to be cherished for the significance they bring into public life. Phogat, the lesser of the cousins of the illustrious wrestler family in Haryana, saw her father being shot dead outside her home when still a child. Her resilience, grit and fierce sense of purpose brought her to where she won laurels for India in Asian Games and World Championships.

Phogat carried the fire in her belly to the streets in New Delhi last year when she, along with her colleagues, took on the then chief of the Wrestling Federation of India and BJP MP Brij Bhushan Singh Sharan for sexual harassment. The visual of her pinned down by Delhi cops was a turning moment. Despite his threats, she almost made it to the Olympic podium – the significance of this must never be lost. Phogat has shown us all how to fight – win or lose.

There are, indeed, questions of accountability in all that transpired in the Paris Olympics leading to her gut-wrenching disqualification. Why, for instance, was she not allowed to compete in her chosen category of 53 kgs during the trials? What did the monitoring team do that allowed her weight to rise after the semi-final? Who could have, should have, been more careful at every step of the way? The answers are unlikely to change the story for Phogat but they are important. Phogat is a winner, India's hero, on and off the mat.

Tough task for Yunus in B'desh

Bangladesh's Muhammad Yunus was set to float a political party of his own in 2007 but he did not follow through. Seventeen years later the Nobel laureate recognised for his work in micro-finance, especially the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, now heads the interim government in his country after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina stepped down and ignominiously fled the strife-torn nation. Yunus has his tasks cut out for him, from quelling the violence in the short term to bringing back a sense of stability in the following weeks to ensuring that free and fair elections are held in the long term.

Yunus was the choice of the students' groups which have led the agitation in the country for months now against what they allege were stage-managed elections in January, which returned Hasina to power, and her autocratic ways and structures. Her shoot-at-sight orders to defence and police forces leading to hundreds of deaths of protestors have opened deep wounds for many in a nation that had seen violent uprisings and similar deaths in 1970-71, when it was still East Pakistan, immediately before it was liberated with help from India. Yunus termed this time as "second independence" when he touched down at Dhaka from Paris. The Hasina government had filed more than 100 criminal cases against him and he was out on bail after being sentenced to six months in jail; he termed the charges as politically motivated. He was cleared of them today.

Yunus commands great respect and regard among academicians and social sector advocacy activists around the world. His pioneering work has helped him form international connections too. Yunus faces a tough task but is in the best position to influence his country's trajectory. As the face of Bangladesh's interim government, he will be called upon to leverage his best qualities such as academic wisdom, patience and ability to work through challenges. He will look to his friends and supporters outside Bangladesh to boost his efforts. Whether that includes India, known for its friendliness with Hasina, is left to be seen.

Yunus commands great respect among academicians and social sector advocacy activists around the world



Guest Column

KOBBI SHOSHANI

Decimation, demilitarisation and deradicalisation is the solution

Hamas is part of the network of totalitarian organisations which aim to bring the whole world under the flag of their interpretation of Islam

October 7, 2023 shall remain perhaps the darkest day in the history of Israel as a nation. In one day, nearly 1200 Israeli civilians and military personnel were brutally murdered by the Hamas terrorists. They burned babies in ovens, raped women and took about 250 hostages, among them were Holocaust survivors. This demanded a response – a response to free the hostages, to avenge the dead and to eliminate the maniacal ideology which led to this unmatched brutality. Hamas is part of the network of totalitarian organisations like Al Qaeda and ISIS which aim to bring the whole world under the flag of their interpretation of Islam. So let me make it clear at the outset that Israel is fighting a war on behalf of the free and democratic world. The civil movements which support Hamas's right to rule Gaza are in a way negating their own right to live in a pluralistic society. The call "from the river to the Sea" in reality aims to annihilate the state of Is-

rael. Israel wants peace in the region. We withdrew from Gaza in 2005 in the hope that the Palestinians could contrive a working and responsible state. They however elected Hamas to power, which refuses to recognise the state of Israel or abide by the peace treaties signed by Palestinians in the past. In 2007, Hamas seized power of Gaza in a violent coup. Over the past 17 years, it siphoned off billions of dollars of aid and used it for building hundreds of kilometres of underground tunnels, procuring arms and firing rockets indiscriminately against Israel. For years, we allowed thousands of people in Gaza to work in Israel hoping that the economic incentive will work as a deterrent. However, what happened on October 7, 2023 has shattered our belief that you can buy peace with terror.

It's now been over 300 days since this war began. So where do we stand? Gaza at this point is more or less totally under Israeli control. A large number of Hamas fighters have been eliminated by Israel.

Hamas uses civilian infrastructure like schools and hospitals for storing rockets and ammunition. That Hamas, an ostensibly pro-Palestinian force is using civilians in Gaza as human shields is perhaps the most telling example of how terror outfits operate only for their own gains, paying no heed to the suffering of those they claim to be fighting for. Hamas's aforementioned use of civilians as human shields as also its refusal to return the hostages constitutes as grave a violation of international law, human rights and basic human sensibilities as one can imagine.

While one is accustomed to apology for such actions emanating from terror organisations and their benefactors, it's usually assumed that international bodies, especially the UN, would conduct themselves in ways befitting the high offices they occupy. Unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the case any more. If it wasn't enough that the UNRWA facilities themselves were being abused to further the goals of Hamas, one now sees nothing less than the Sec-

retary General's office itself engaging in "providing context" to the unequivocally condemnable actions of Oct 7th. The penchant of the UN as also of the ICJ, ICC and other international bodies to repeatedly disregard Hamas's use of human shields and equating the atrocities committed by leaders of terror outfits with the legitimate response to such attacks headed by democratically elected government of a sovereign state only serves to further weaken the credibility that such bodies enjoy.

Israel has always strived to live in peace with its neighbours. In the past, we have made peace with Egypt and Jordan. In the recent past, Israel established full diplomatic relations with UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and South Sudan. We are working closely with the moderate Arab countries on platforms like I2U2 and IMEC. However, the Oct 7 attacks taught us that regional peace and stability will remain a distant dream unless we end the Hamas rule in Gaza and dismantle the Iranian terror network in the region. Israel is fighting a seven-

front war. It doesn't want to escalate the situation but is well prepared to defend its borders and people. Any long-term peace in the region requires decimation of Hamas, demilitarisation of Gaza strip and rebuilding with the help of countries that have friendly relations with Israel and deradicalisation of the people.

In such tribulating times, it's the outpouring of support from sensible and empathetic people all over the world that has worked as a moral force for Israel to continue its efforts towards ending this ideology of hate and terror and battling the rise of anti-Semitism globally. The unequivocal support from our Indian friends is overwhelming and heartening. India, being a victim of cross border terrorism has shown great understanding of Israel's predicaments. We, the Jewish people, have a long memory and never forget the people and countries which support us during difficult times.

The writer is the Consul General of Israel to Mid-West India



Wide Angle

SACHIN KALBAG

Why Harris picked Tim Walz, and what it means for the election

Walz and Harris get along like a house on fire, and this rubs off on their supporters who have thronged to all of their rallies by the thousands

US Vice President and the Democratic Party's nominee for the 2024 presidential election Kamala Harris has picked the relatively unknown Minnesota Governor Tim Walz as her running mate. Walz was in the running for a week or so, along with Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro who looked like the more desirable candidate since his state is possibly the most important constituency that could decide this year's results.

American presidential election results are based on the electoral college system. Each state is allocated a number of electoral college delegates, depending on its number of US Representatives (equivalent to a Lok Sabha MP in India) and the two senators. California, for example, has 54 votes. Texas has 40. On the other hand, Vermont has just three. The candidate that wins the state's popular vote is declared the outright winner and is allotted the state's electoral college votes. Whoever wins 270 or more votes, is declared the President.

To be sure, you can lose the overall popular vote across the country, and still become President because you could win key states with more votes. This is exactly what happened in November 2016 when Donald Trump polled 63 million votes, three million fewer than Hillary Clinton, and yet became President because he won key battleground states such as Pennsylv-

vania, Michigan, Arizona and Wisconsin. In 2020, Trump lost both the popular vote as well as the electoral college. This time round, Joe Biden won the exact same swing states, and comprehensively defeated his Republican Party rival in the electoral college. In terms of popular vote, Biden had won 81 million to Trump's 74 million.

It was important to contextualise the swing states in the choice of Harris' running mate. Pennsylvania, with 19 votes could turn out to be the most important state in a tight race. Three other swing states – Arizona (11), Michigan (15) and Wisconsin (10) – are key regions that could decide the election, and consequently America's future. Nevada (6) and Georgia (16) are two other swing states. Together, the swing states command 77 electoral college votes. Because Pennsylvania holds a disproportionately outsized influence, Shapiro, who is quite popular there, may have been the obvious choice. However, Harris went with Walz.

Why? My Washington DC sources told me that Shapiro, in his meeting with Harris on Sunday, demanded a bigger role in decision-making if she wins the presidency. The Vice President does not have a substantial role in administration in the US, and is called upon only when the President is incapacitated. In the US Senate, the VP is the chairperson, and can be asked to cast her deciding vote in case of a tie in passing a legislation. There



are other responsibilities, of course, but nothing much of consequence. Harris found herself in this position with Biden. Though there was no acrimony between the two, Harris had a rather cold chemistry with her boss, and Biden hardly called on her for the bigger decisions. Shapiro wanted to change this.

Two, Walz is relatable. He served in the US Army for 24 years; he was a high school teacher and later a football coach. He served in the US Congress for 12 years before becoming a two-time governor of Minnesota. He was also endorsed by the United Auto Workers, one of the largest workers' unions in the US. His CV, therefore, is exactly what Harris wants to win Middle America votes.

Three, the Minnesota man is a popular two-term governor. He has been passing legislation, including an abortion law, that has endeared him-

self to progressives.

And then, there's the chemistry. Walz and Harris get along like a house on fire, and this rubs off on their supporters who have thronged to all of their rallies by the thousands, with several thousands more waiting outside the venue to get in. Walz's folksy oratory – as compared to the urbane Shapiro who sounds exactly like a vocal doppelganger of former President Barack Obama – has endeared himself to the Democratic base just two days into his announcement.

There could be a deal between Harris and Shapiro, who has promised to campaign wholeheartedly in Pennsylvania for the ticket despite losing the VP role. Sources suggest that Shapiro could get Secretary of State if he delivers the state to the Democrats.

The last 72 hours have been a complete turnaround for the Democrats, thanks to Walz's selection. He has

brought back the energy needed for the Democrats to not only compete against the Trump-Vance ticket, but also has given them the hope of victory. There is a slew of opinion polls expected to be released over the weekend that could demonstrate this.

The other impact that Walz's selection has had is that the Trump campaign has been caught unawares; there seems to be no coherent response other than accusing him of being "very liberal". Admittedly in the world of Trump's Republican base, "liberal" is a far greater insult than being called "Satan". Yet, in the larger context of the election, there has been no damage so far.

In his interview with Harris, Walz apparently told her that he is happy to play second fiddle in terms of responsibilities while he will push himself to get the necessary votes from the swing states. As per plan, the two have been touring these battleground states since the announcement. By the time the Democratic National Convention takes place in Chicago later this month, they would have toured at least four or five of the battleground states.

Trump and Vance, meanwhile, will have to regroup. The next 89 days are when the elections are going to be won and lost.

Sachin Kalbag, Senior Fellow at The Takshashila Institution, is a former Washington Correspondent and editor of Indian newspapers. Email: sachin@takshashila.org.in. Twitter: @SachinKalbag

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear reader, We are eager to know your opinions, comments and suggestions. Write to letters@fpj.co.in with the title of the letter in the subject line. Using snail mail? Send your letters to The Free Press Journal, Free Press House, 215 Free Press Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai 400021.

Drop by drop

Now that the world class building, built by (presumably) world class architects and engineers, using world class construction materials and world class design is leaking drop by drop clear drop, it's time to take necessary action before

the drops create a deluge like situation for our parliamentarians. A few suggestions that may be acted upon are as follows:
• Raincoats may be provided to all MPs, be they from the ruling party or from the Opposition, lest the entire building springs

a leak. The nation can ill afford to miss even a single session. (FM to make special budgetary provision for raincoats. Also, due precaution must be taken, so that bulk orders for raincoats are not placed with cronies of the ruling dispensation.)

MIKA'S MATRIX



- More buckets need to be placed on standby. Only blue buckets will do, saffron buckets are likely to create a controversy.
 - Under the skill development programme, MPs may be taught to make paper boats by themselves (Aatmanirbhar Bharat) and sail them in the pool that is sooner than later going to be created.
 - Media houses should be given clear instructions not to make a lake out of a small leak by overzealous reporting.
 - A "hawan" ceremony may be held at the earliest to ward off the "inauspicious" leak that has given rise to so many flushed faces.
- Avinash Godbole, Dewas

A bad example

With reference to the letter by Avinash Godbole, 'All the President's jaunts' (Aug 8), work and pleasure have never been shown to mix well. Perks given to politicians and ministers should drastically be reduced; the same goes for the President.

Peter Castellino, Mumbai



Bag that weight!

The implementation of bagless days will make learning in schools more joyful, experimental and hopefully stress-free. The national education policy 2020 has recommended that all students in classes 6-8 participate in a 10-day bagless period. The idea behind this move is to make them an integral part of the learning process rather than the existing education. It will give them a firsthand experience of important vocational crafts and disciplines. Talent in children needs to be nurtured from an early

age. It helps them develop better confidence, resilience and self-regulation skills. By engaging students in hands-on projects, the school fosters practical application of knowledge.

Jayanthi Subramaniam, Mumbai

For some time now, there has been a demand to reduce the burden of school bags, which now seems to be coming to fruition. Children will be taken to and learn about different places.

Sandeep Kumar, Madhupur (Jharkhand)

MIXED BAG

More often than not, old comrades, given the state of communism around the world, are expected to fade away. But Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the former chief minister of West Bengal who died yesterday, can be counted as a shining exception to this aphorism. This is because death will not efface Mr Bhattacharjee's legacy — albeit a mixed one. The veteran leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), who occupied the chief minister's chair for 11 long years, was not the average politician. His interest in the arts, especially cinema and theatre, was a rarity among his peers cutting across party lines. His adherence to rectitude and his aversion to ostentatiousness were a testament to moral integrity, a trait that is uncommon in India's political fraternity. He was an obedient soldier of the party — a regimented outfit such as the CPI(M) cannot do with dissidence. But Mr Bhattacharjee, unlike his comrades, did strive to change the party and, with it, Bengal's fortunes. His endeavour to bring business back to Bengal — the CPI(M)'s perverse success in driving capital out of the state notwithstanding — by ushering in industrial projects to Singur and Nandigram bore evidence of a man who was willing to take on the old guard of the regime on the prickly subject of industrialisation. And it did appear that Bengal was willing to dream along with Mr Bhattacharjee, at least for a while. The verdict of the 2006 assembly elections that the Left Front won handsomely could be looked at as a collective endorsement of Mr Bhattacharjee's slogan of a 'New Bengal'.

But a dreamer need not necessarily be a doer. One of Mr Bhattacharjee's abiding failures — hence his chequered legacy — was his inability to proceed with Bengal's industrialisation with the consent of crucial stakeholders, especially the peasantry. The land agitation in Singur along with the deadly turn of events in Nandigram where lives were lost on account of the heavy-handed approach of the erstwhile administration exposed Mr Bhattacharjee's Achilles' heel: he was at once a dreamer and a domineering leader. The slide that began for him and his party with these tumultuous events ultimately led to what had once seemed inconceivable: Mamata Banerjee's storming of the red bastion. Perhaps a training in the fundamentals of democracy, rather than the strictures of the Little Red Book, would have prepared Mr Bhattacharjee better to deal with the crisis. Was he the right man for Bengal but in the wrong party?

BUSINESS CLASS

The minister of state for education said that the states and Union Territories should be responsible for regulating coaching centres according to the rules that the Union education ministry provided last January. This might address some serious problems in these institutes, maintenance for one. Three young people died when a basement library was flooded in one of them. But this evades the root of these problems while passing the buck to the states. The information provided by the minister in Parliament revealed the massive growth in business of coaching centres — in 2023-24 it had increased 149 times over the previous year. Such success would breed sufficient confidence for its owners to ignore the small stuff, like maintenance, which ended in tragedy. The increase was already obvious in 2020-21, which coincided with the year the National Education Policy was implemented. But a coincidence is unlikely. The reasons behind the rapid burgeoning of the business would provide the link.

The NEP professed to introduce systems that shall reduce dependence on coaching centres. Yet the opposite happened. The gradual centralisation of all entrance tests promoted by the NEP in search of a single standard for all has led to numerous problems. A common entrance examination for college or university tends to incline towards the method and curriculum of the central board of school-leaving examinations, leaving all others, especially state boards, at an obvious disadvantage. Additionally, questions are increasingly in the multiple-choice format in spite of protests from academics. Both these reasons drive students towards coaching, on which guardians are spending at least two-thirds of the total budgetary allocation for higher education for 2024-25. The result is a predominance of rote learning and superficial knowledge; depth of understanding is not tested. But, ultimately, it is the decline in the quality of school education that must be blamed. Without a thorough understanding of lessons and intensive assignments that are regularly assessed, students feel the need for supportive training; otherwise they will not succeed in the entrance tests of the best institutions. What needs to be ensured are conditions that will stop the proliferation of coaching institutes which would include improving the situation in all schools and de-centralising entrance examinations. These are the issues the education minister might discuss with the states. Perhaps he might collaborate with them in addressing the problem.

SCRIPSI

Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.

OMAR KHAYYAM

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (1944-2024)

Dream turned sour

ASHIS CHAKRABARTI

Academics debate what the Bengali *bhadralok* is like and what his role has been in Bengal's politics and society. Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee fitted the stereotype more than most politicians of his time — a middle-class background, honest and simple living, love of literature and a passion for liberal values and causes. Generally speaking, the *bhadralok* could argue endlessly on Marxian theories of capital but would have little idea of how capital worked in real life. It was much the same for the man who felt more comfortable with Marx, Mayakovsky and Marquez than with money matters.

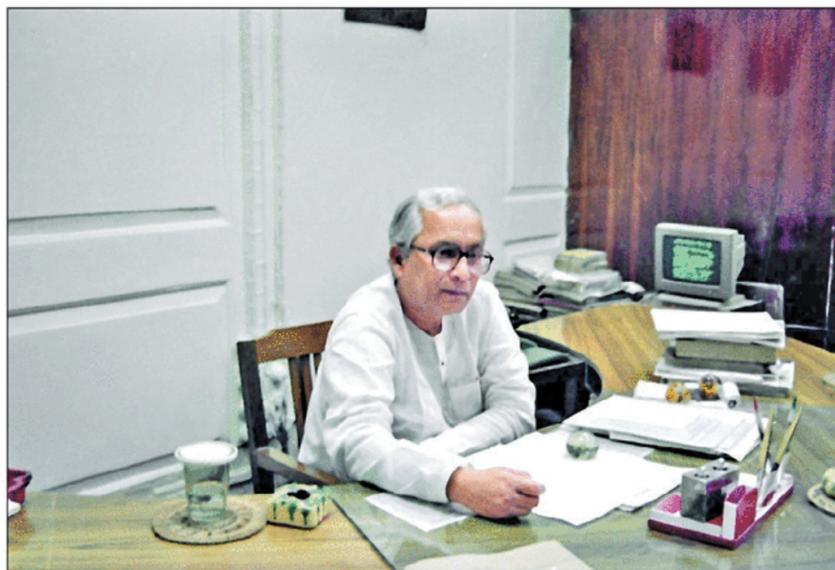
When such a man is seen as the poster boy of capitalism, it is more than a simple transformation — you are tempted to call it some kind of a metamorphosis. In the 1990s, much talk about Bengal's politics revolved around the question, who after Jyoti Basu? Bhattacharjee was the obvious choice, most people agreed. After all, he was the Number Two man in Basu's cabinet and enjoyed full support of his party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which at that time had Anil Biswas, his lifelong friend and comrade, as the Bengal unit secretary.

"Who? Me? On that chair?" Bhattacharjee had exclaimed when I met him in his office at Writers' Buildings, preparing for the story for the Delhi paper with which I then worked. Somnath Chatterjee would be better suited for the job, he hinted. I was surprised to hear that from him — he could not have been unaware that Chatterjee may have been close to Basu but could hardly be accepted by the party for the top job because he was rather 'aristocratic' and not likely to take orders from lesser men like Biswas, Biman Bose, and Subhas Chakraborty.

But why wouldn't he step into Basu's shoes? What he told me was perhaps half in jest: "Sitting on that chair requires you to make all kinds of compromises. I can't deal with the business people the way the chief minister's chair demands." He wasn't being just facetious. His party was not only clueless about the ways of commerce and industry but also took great leaps to destroy Bengal's industrial legacy.

But when he did take over from Basu, he embarked on what seemed to be a mission impossible. He had to change not only himself but, more important, his party and its rabid anti-business image and its policies.

Ashis Chakrabarti was a senior editor with The Telegraph



True, Basu too made a beginning with the Left Front government's 1994 New Industrial Policy but he gave in to party hawks far too often and far too easily.

With Bhattacharjee, it was a different game. The man had his weaknesses, but few doubted his passion and sincerity. Sometimes, he would get too carried away by his newfound zeal of attracting business for Bengal to see the complexities involved in the task.

I remember how he beamed with joy when, in Jakarta in 2005, his government signed several MOUs with the Salim Group of Indonesia for some projects in Bengal. "It's the happiest day of my life," he told Indian journalists who went there to cover the event. He brushed aside remarks that the communists in India once hated Indonesia for the massacre of hundreds of thousands of comrades of what then was the world's second-largest communist party.

The same dramatic change marked his meeting with Henry Kissinger and the former US treasury secretary, Henry Paulson, who came to Calcutta to try and persuade him that the central leaders of the CPI(M) must also change their anti-Americanism. It was a far cry from the time when leftists in Calcutta burnt effigies of Kissinger and Robert McNamara for the American massacre of communists in Vietnam and Cambodia. Leading American and other foreign publications ran cover stories on the reformed communist from Bengal.

At home in Bengal, businessmen gave him the kind of approval that Basu never got. Initial doubts soon gave way to genuine cheers among the sceptics in industry circles. I recall his triumphant smile on the day of the result after the Bengal assembly elections in 2006. A letter from Ratan Tata, promising the small car project in Singur, was the first thing he brandished as a signal for a 'new Bengal'.

As he reached out to investors, he also waged a battle with his own party and its militant trade union, the CITU. He tried to clean up the mess created by the party and its teachers' organisations in education. So drastic were some of his actions against party sceptics that they took their complaint to the then-retired Basu, hoping that the latter could rein in Bhattacharjee.

But his two missions — of bringing business back to Bengal and of mending his party's ways — remained impossible in the end. Not long after he hoped that the Tata project in Singur and a proposed petrochemical hub at Nandigram would be his twin triumphs, they turned out to be the twin towers of the coming collapse. The party's withdrawal of support from the UPA government at the Centre in 2008 on the issue of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal showed the limits of his struggle with the party.

Yet, his full-blooded campaign for new industry was not without its justification. The Left Front's earlier programmes of land dis-

tribution and empowerment of poor people through the *panchayati raj* had worn themselves out. Bhattacharjee and his party argued that industry was the only hope for Bengal's massive army of the unemployed. But he had little viable idea of how to find land for new industries without alienating the peasantry, particularly the marginal farmers. His drive for industry was an attempt to make a virtue of necessity.

But it unleashed political and other forces that Bhattacharjee didn't quite know how to control or even fight. And the biggest of the forces was none other than Mamata Banerjee, his main challenger. When 14 people were killed in police firing in Nandigram, the endgame for Bhattacharjee began. Neither he nor his party could turn the tide back. Mamata Banerjee managed to turn her Singur-Nandigram agitation into something of a wave, which drew in its fold not just her Trinamool Congress but also people from all walks of life, especially the intellectuals and even leftists of various hues.

However, there is no irony in the fall of a politician who was perhaps one of the cleanest of the tribe in India and who promised a new beginning. The Left rule in Bengal was so old — 34 uninterrupted years — and the Left ideology was such a lost cause in the post-Soviet Union world that Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee had no way of winning the battle. But the man will be remembered for daring to dream.

Divisive law

■ Sir — The Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh has added teeth to the existing law against unlawful religious conversion ("Out of law", Aug 6). The constitutional right to freedom of religion entails the right not just to practise one's faith but also to propagate it. Yet, all religious conversions are assumed to be coerced and illegal. Those who are thought to be converting others to another religion or to be involved in such conversions are being treated as criminals. These offences are cognisable and non-bailable under the new law. This amendment is no doubt a fallout of the alleged tussle between the Bharatiya Janata Party's central leadership and Adityanath.

S.S. Paul, Nadia

■ Sir — While forced or deceptive religious conversions must not be condoned, the punishment for it should not be this harsh. This new law exposes the hypocrisy of the Uttar Pradesh government, which turns a blind eye to the hooliganism of the *kamariyas*. Moreover, important issues such as waterlogging in the state assembly premises have not been addressed by the government. Yogi Adityanath is merely trying to win back Hindu votes by passing strict laws against religious conversion.

Anthony Henriques, Mumbai

■ Sir — The faction of the BJP that backs Yogi Adityanath seems bent on taking an extreme communal position to upstage the Central leadership. The Uttar Pradesh government had recently issued a controversial order regarding eateries along the *kanwar yatra* route. Such steps do not augur well for democracy.



Joyride

■ Sir — Books can certainly enliven a boring journey. In a novel initiative, Uber has launched a campaign where commuters travelling in the company's shuttle buses can read books by Penguin Random House India that will be available on the vehicles. If more readers start pooling transport, it can greatly reduce air pollution caused by personal vehicles. Be it blaring popular Bengali films in long-distance buses in rural Bengal, playing episodes from *Tom and Jerry* in the Calcutta Metro or letting passengers read bestsellers on Uber shuttles, keeping travellers entertained is no mean feat.

Shreya Chatterjee, Calcutta

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Khokan Das, Calcutta

Unsafe lessons

■ Sir — Aspirants for exams conducted by the Union Public Service Commission will breathe a sigh of relief

as the Supreme Court has taken cognisance of the failure of various coaching centres in providing safety and security to students, resulting in the unfortunate demise of three aspirants recently ("SC orders coaching centre safety drive", Aug 6). It is astonishing how coaching centres that do not have adequate safety infrastructure were allowed to operate. Authorities should be held accountable for their gross negligence and punished.

Arun Gupta, Calcutta

■ Sir — The death of three UPSC aspirants brought to light the fact that famous coaching centres across the country often flout building codes and economically exploit students. Thousands of youth flock to Delhi to fulfil their dreams of becoming civil servants. However, they are fleeced by coaching centres that take undue advantage of students without providing them with basic amenities. The apex court's order regarding students' safety is thus timely.

S.H. Quadri, Bikaner

Smart plan

■ Sir — Succession planning is a tricky task for family-owned businesses ("Adani ready with succession plan", Aug 6). For instance, the dirty laundry of the Ambani family was aired in public when Dhirubhai Ambani's businesses were divided between Anil and Mukesh Ambani. Few families can claim to have handled this situation gracefully. Gautam Adani has drawn out a detailed succession plan for his sons and nephews. Since his successors



Planning ahead

will handle different businesses, one hopes that the Adani Group does not suffer from internal strife.

Bal Govind, Noida

Identity crisis

■ Sir — The Central Bureau of Investigation has registered a complaint against and busted an Aadhaar racket in Rajasthan ("Aadhaar racket busted", Aug 4). Three people were found making illegal Aadhaar cards using forged documents and fingerprints. The fingerprints and retinal scans that were used allegedly belonged to school children. This is a grave problem. It may allow foreign nationals to infiltrate and reside in India and avail of welfare facilities. This racket should be investigated thoroughly for any political connections.

Birkha Khadka Duvareli, Siliguri

Bland taste

■ Sir — For Bengalis, the combination of *muri*, *telebhaja* and *knacha lonka* is a staple during rainy evenings. But with the hike in the price of green chilis, Bengalis may have to ditch their favourite snack this monsoon ("Supply home truths keep chili-ginger prices high", Aug 1).

Sourish Misra, Calcutta

Letters should be sent to: The Telegraph, 6 Prafulla Sarkar Street, Calcutta 700001, ttedit@abp.in

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR

HINTERLAND

A DEAF EAR

What is dreadful about India is that it refuses to learn from or act on environmental disasters. Indians' 'we don't care' attitude is like that of Sheikh Chilli who refused to listen to the wise counsels of passers-by who warned him of his inevitable fall from the tree because he was severing the branch he was sitting on with a saw. The story evokes laughter, and even pity, but it has a lesson.

When it comes to real life, wherein deliberate ignorance of wise counsel can lead to unprecedented pain, loss of lives and material, the emotion evoked is not pity, but anguish. The immediate example of such a painful outcome of ignoring sage advice is the loss of hundreds of poor lives and the flattening of at least three villages in Kerala's hilly and picturesque district of Wayanad in massive landslides triggered by incessant and extreme rainfall. The Wayanad tragedy in 2024 leads to a sense of *déjà vu* — this is not the first time such a thing has happened and it will not be the last.

We learned nothing from Malin near Pune a few years ago, Kedarnath over a decade ago, Pettimudi in Kerala in 2020, or Raigarh near Mumbai last year. Hundreds of people died in those places in landslides which are never sudden and come only after we ignore the signs. Remember Uttarakhhand, last year? It took rescuers a herculean effort to rescue 41 workers trapped in an under-construction tunnel of the ecologically-damaging Char Dham highway project when it caved in; a landslide had tripped it off.

The tragedy in Wayanad was foretold. Some western men did tell us that the Western Ghats are a no-go area. We did not heed their warnings. India's top ecologist, Madhav Gadgil, who led the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel over a decade ago, asked governments to stop all the extractive activities in these majestic mountains, the origin of major rivers, lest we pay a heavy price. The report was dumped and another committee constituted. That committee watered down the report but retained most of its argument. The new report, too, was binned. Both the reports occurred that the Western Ghats are in trouble.

We have had the scientific evidence and models about the exact locations where future landslides may occur with devastating outcomes and, yet, the Centre and the states refuse to act. Material growth imperatives pip ecological concerns. And so tourism, quarrying, mining, cutting, sand extraction and deforestation go on unabated.

Based on different scientific databases we know which regions are in high-risk, landslide-prone zones. Refer to the Indian Space Research Organisation's annually updated *Landslide Atlas of India*, which places Wayanad in 13th place (indicative of very high risk) in the list of 147 high-risk districts in 17 states and two Union territories. These districts fall in three ecologically sensitive regions — the north-western Himalayan region, the eastern Himalayas and the entire Western Ghats, and all three are among the most abused sensitive ecosystems. India recorded about 30,000 landslides between 1998 and 2022 in these very areas, the *Atlas* tells us. What is more, this database has three categories: seasonal, route-wise and events-based. This means we know the exact areas within those 147 vulnerable districts where people live in the shadow of catastrophic landslides every monsoon.

We also know that the Indian monsoons are changing perceptibly and extreme rainfall events are now the new normal. Most landslides in India occur during the monsoon (June through September). We are among the top five countries with the highest landslide risk, contributing 16% of such events triggered by rainfall. Yet, we cannot resist extractive economic development even in highly sensitive zones. The science is telling us to behave. Is it the collective greed that compels us to ignore its counsel?



CONTRAPUNTO

A man will commit almost any wrong only to build a great, gloomy, dark-chambered mansion, for himself to die in, and for his posterity to be miserable in

—NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Citizen Vinesh

Rarely does a rare sportsperson become a star without winning. And her story is not over

To the podium finishers, belong the laurels. But then there is Vinesh Phogat. Goldless, medalless, she has got India buzzing like the bee's knees. The public gaze on her life story is not new. It intensified as she stormed into the Olympic wrestling final, the first Indian woman to do so. Then grew upon her weighted disqualification. Instead of dimming her story arc, her losses have had a habit of lifting it higher. Will this pattern endure?

Of course, it is routine to lose in sports. Most Olympians will lose in Paris too. There are Indians who will return having been in painful touching distance of bronze. In archery, shooting, badminton, weightlifting. Maybe Vinesh's had more than her fair share of injuries. But the hits to her elbows and knees are only one part of what's riveting about her biography. What's made this Olympian stand out in India, is the battle she has fought outside the ring, and not for herself either. In the fight against sexual harassment, the odds are far more leaden. Many Indians cannot imagine themselves taking on such odds, anymore than an Olympic challenge. But they can appreciate the courage of someone who takes on both, with a kind of reckless heroism. It is also an inspiration for others to climb their own hills.



Conspiracy theories that have grown around her disqualification do suffer from ignorance, about wrestling's rules. This is a country where most sports conversation is about cricket, after all. But the doubting is also related to the institutional response to the wrestlers' anti-sexual-harassment protests, how harshly police were set upon them. There was even opacity in the processes where Vinesh had to transition from the 53kg to 50kg class. That the sports minister has given Parliament details about how much money govt has spent on her training and an MP translated her disqualification into a "lesson for all of us" to keep our weight in check, are scrambling responses to an antsy public sphere.

The power of this story is indivisible from how Vinesh looks and her words. Whether it is protesting, attacking, celebrating, healing, her images have ineffable pull. But so does the tweet announcing her retirement, or how she flayed Indian society for normalising sexual abuse and harassment. It is reminiscent of Muhammad Ali's eloquence: "You my opposer when I want equality." But like him, her decriers are also legion. They will have a say in shaping her story too. The fight is on.

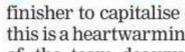
Captain & Goalie

Harmanpreet & Sreejesh best exemplified the spirit of our bronze-winning hockey team

Forty-four years ago in Moscow, India had prevailed over Spain 4-3 in a nerve-jangling final to claim its eighth Olympic gold. The two sides were contesting for a different metal in Paris yesterday. But nothing seemed to have changed. The intensity, the nerves, the desperation — everything was evident once more as Harmanpreet Singh-led India won 2-1 in another pulse-pounding game. For the second time in a row, India has won the bronze in the Olympics, and this one couldn't have come at a more opportune time.

In the past few days, India has endured a string of misses and misfortunes. In Paris, there have been more fourth-spot finishes than ever before, not to forget the tragic disqualification of wrestler Vinesh Phogat, a national heartbreak. The bronze, coming after a week without medals, will bring a degree of joy to millions invested in the national sport.

Teamwork was the key to India's victory. In every match, every member played his heart out. Defeating Great Britain, despite playing with 10 men for the larger part of the game, says a lot about the team's commitment. Overpowering Australia for the first time in Olympics since 1972 showed they had gotten over a major mental block. Had they converted their chances and displayed more self-belief, India might have even defeated Germany in the semis. What the team lacked was a quality finisher to capitalise on the umpteenth field goal chances. Nonetheless this is a heartwarming success story that must be relished. Two pillars of the team deserve special mention: Harmanpreet and Sreejesh. Harmanpreet, who scored 10 of the team's 15 goals, wasn't just an efficient converter of penalty corners and a solid defender, but also a true leader of men. And custodian Sreejesh's heroics in all games, especially in shoot-outs, will always be missed but never forgotten.



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Let's fake it

If everything and everyone becomes spurious the bogus becomes the bona fide

Jug Suraiya



Employees of an accredited university in Rajasthan have reportedly hit upon a money-making scheme by handing out fake degrees to students in return for cash.

If this lucrative business catches on, and other institutions follow suit, it might lead to a scenario as envisioned in Second Opinion.

Rajesh is an up-and-coming executive in an MNC. The time comes when he has to go for a medical check-up with the company doctor, the result of which will determine whether his annual contract with the organisation will be extended. Rajesh undergoes his tests and the results show that he's failed to meet the required parameters for him to remain in the company's employ.

Desperate, Rajesh asks the doctor to change the report from negative to positive, for a monetary compensation. The medic complies and Rajesh hands in the falsified report to the company's CEO to get a job extension.

However, after a while, Rajesh's conscience begins to bother him and he returns to the doctor and asks for the earlier, negative report to submit to the CEO.

The doctor hands the negative report to Rajesh and says, Here you are, but they're both the same, you know. Confused, Rajesh asks, How can both be the same when the first is real and the second is a fake?

Smiling reassuringly, the doctor explains: The reports are the same because they're both fakes. They're both fakes because I'm a fake. I'm not a real doctor but a fake doctor, having bought my fake doctor's degree from a fake medical college.

Bemused by this revelation, Rajesh goes to the CEO and confesses that the medical report he's submitted was a fake of another report which was also a fake. Not to worry, says the CEO. You see, I'm also a fake, a fake CEO who landed this job on a fake MBA degree.

What a coincidence, says Rajesh. I got my job thanks to a fake diploma from a fake online training institute!

The moral of the story being that if everyone and everything is fake then the fake becomes the real. And vice versa.

HOUSE THAT FAIR?

Reinstating indexation option only for pre-budget real estate sales doesn't help those selling later. Middle class will be hit. Home ownership is not like other assets

Indranil Sen Gupta



The govt's decision to withdraw budget's proposed increase in long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on real estate must be welcomed. But, as the move is limited to property deals executed before budget day (July 23), transactions after that cut-off date will invite higher tax liability than before. And therein lies the rub.

In India, real estate is special, as it constitutes a large part of household wealth. Given a limited equity culture, property is seen as a hedge against inflation, in terms of both capital value and rentals. While it would be ideal to tax all asset classes at the same rate, which was the logic behind the budgetary proposal, there is no gainsaying that a one-size-fits-all policy does not always work in our complex world. Societies often have relative preferences for particular assets based on social mores that cannot be ignored when it comes to taxation.

Beyond the psychological comfort of having a roof over one's head, property is seen as a hedge against inflation, whether in terms of capital value or rental yield

How it will work | With govt now offering sellers a choice between the old and new regimes, Delhi will apply the lower of the two tax liabilities for properties purchased before July 23. Suppose one had bought a property for ₹100 in 2002 and sold it for ₹400 now. Under the old regime, the seller could claim inflation indexation of 3.63 times from 2001-02. The capital gains levied would broadly work out to ₹7.4, as it would be imposed at 20% on the ₹37 inflation-adjusted capital gains. Under the new regime, the tax liability would rise to ₹37.5, ie, at 12.5% of the entire capital gains of ₹300, with indexation done away with.



'Live Up To What Parliamentary Stands For'

Lok Sabha Speaker writes on the criticality of discipline and decorum in legislatures, for both proper conduct of business and health of democracy

Om Birla



Legislatures have a sacrosanct responsibility of oversight, law making and ensuring financial accountability. Over the decades, there has been a manifold increase in roles and responsibilities of legislatures, especially in a developing country like ours. Ensuring discipline and decorum in legislatures has assumed critical importance for orderly and seamless conduct of business of the House and for virtuous outcomes and success of our parliamentary democracy.

When disruption in legislatures becomes a regular feature, it not only results in loss of taxpayer money, but also projects a negative image of legislatures, which can lead to erosion of faith in these institutions. Lack of discipline and decorum in legislatures cannot augur well for the health of our parliamentary democracy.

The All India Presiding Officers' Conference (AIPOC), apex body of presiding officers of legislatures in the country, has played an important role in the evolution of Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in our legislatures. Through dialogue and discussion, it has come up with solutions to complex problems.

At a Nov 2001 conference, AIPOC deliberated on discipline and decorum in Parliament and state and UT legislatures. A resolution and a code of conduct for members were unanimously adopted. In 2000, with AIPOC's efforts, an ad hoc Ethics Committee was constituted, which became a permanent standing committee of Lok Sabha in 2015. Its recommendations have a significant bearing on conduct of members.

Parliamentary decorum encompasses a set of rules, conventions, and etiquette governing behaviour of members within the legislative chamber. Key aspects

relate to respect for the chair and fellow members; relevance of speeches and questions to matter under discussion; orderly conduct; refraining from interrupting other members, creating commotion, or engaging in other disruptive behaviour. Members should use appropriate and dignified language in the House.

Rules and standards of conduct for Lok Sabha members are provided in Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in Lok Sabha, directions issued by Speaker under Rules of Procedure, and rulings from the Chair. The Handbook for Members and Practice & Procedure of Parliament serve as guides on desirable conduct. Members are expected to be well conversant with these

effective and constructive utilisation of time allocated for legislative and other businesses of the House.

The Lok Sabha Speaker is entrusted by the Constitution, rules of procedure and conduct of business, and by parliamentary tradition, with wide-ranging powers and responsibilities. Speaker is not only looked upon as moderator and facilitator of sittings, but also vested with authority to help frame sound rules and promote practices, customs and conventions that create a healthy parliamentary culture.

Given his wide and onerous responsibilities, Speaker is also vested by Lok Sabha with disciplinary powers. Maintenance of discipline and decorum in the House is a delicate duty.

For instance, Speaker can intervene when a member makes an unwarranted or defamatory remark by asking him/her to withdraw the offending remark and even order its expunction. Speaker may also order a member guilty of disorderly conduct to withdraw from the House and name a member for suspension if such member disregards or questions the Chair's authority and persists in obstructing proceedings.

In no situation should the authority of the Chair be questioned or his/her instructions disregarded. Speaker is final arbiter of all questions arising in the legislature's precincts. Members should regard the Chair not as an individual but as a supreme institution, a living embodiment of the authority of Parliament.

Elected members are looked up to by people of this country, especially youth, as their role models. Therefore, the conduct of legislators should be dignified, orderly, exemplary and beyond reproach. Upholding parliamentary decorum is critical for the edifice of parliamentary democracy and its supreme democratic institution. Parliamentarians and legislators are, thus, bound by the spirit of the Constitution to maintain high standards of conduct in the houses of legislature.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



How can you prove whether at this moment we are sleeping, and all our thoughts are a dream; or whether we are awake, and talking to one another in the waking state?

Plato

Politics And Ethics Must Be Welded Into A Unit

Sumit Paul

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men," the historian and moralist, who was otherwise known as Acton, expressed this opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton in 1887.

What's happening in Bangladesh is the quintessence of what Acton observed more than a century ago. Despotism is always accompanied by corruption of morality and a sharp decline in ethics. But we tend to explain these observations only in the context of politics and political power, thus limiting the scope and ambit of power. Power in any field has a debilitating influence on the person who wields it and those who are at the receiving end of it.

Humans are hungry for 3Ps: Power, pelf and popularity. Since joining

politics gets you these 3Ps quickly and on a silver platter that, politics and absolute power often go hand in hand. Politics, everywhere and in all eras, has been a rather murky sphere.

Plato's political philosophy argues that in a system, in which everyone has a right to rule, all sorts of selfish politicians who care nothing for the people but are only motivated by their own personal desires can attain power. Power, particularly political power, is highly seductive. Politicians might suffer from Fiefdom Syndrome and also from a sort of pontificating superiority complex, which can be so overwhelming that they cannot part with it. The unbridled power enjoyed by the influential folks is so addictive that they want to perpetuate it despite having a lurking doubt that one day it

might be snatched from them.

Power and politics have a flame and a moth connection. A moth is well aware that the flame will consume it. Yet, it cannot hold itself back from drawing to it and getting burnt to ashes. Likewise, politicians are aware that political power will eventually be their undoing. Power that gets you instant popularity and pelf cannot be done away with so easily. That's the reason politicians are so fond of defending their enviable positions. British PM Herbert Henry Asquith would say that totality of anything could be dangerous. Though there's no denying that there have been morally upright politicians in all countries and ages who stuck to exalted human values, they have been few and far between.

When the public challenges dubious

politicians and their reigns, widespread chaos is a natural outcome. Political chaos invariably gets with religious frenzy in modern times because politics and religion get along very well. We mustn't forget that in the past 10 years in Bangladesh, murders of atheists and rationalists by the fanatics were given Nelson's eye by the just-topped govt.

Politicians nurture religionists and ultimately get the boot by the latter. Religion is a tool for all the politicians. The unfortunate happenings in Bangladesh should serve as lessons to all politicians that the state and faith must never be mixed up. What we can learn from the mayhem and coup in Bangladesh is that a politician can be hoisted with his own petard, and following unethical ways will sooner or later boomerang. Politics and ethics may appear to be poles asunder, but they can be welded into a scrupulous unit for the survival of a democracy.



THE SPEAKING TREE

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Up but out

Vinesh Phogat went to extraordinary lengths to win a medal

It proved to be a tale of so near and yet so far for Vinesh Phogat on a sombre Wednesday in Paris. The 29-year-old wrestler with roots in Haryana was in red-hot form and seemingly the force was with her in the women's 50kg segment. However, hours before the summit clash against Sarah Ann Hildebrandt of the United States, Vinesh's Olympic dreams of winning a gold fizzled out. In the acutely razor-sharp lines that distinguish weight categories especially in combat sport, India's ace wrestler was found to be 100 grams above the stipulated 50kg at the 7.15 a.m. mandatory weigh-in before the final bout. This was heartbreak of the extreme kind for the athlete and the funereal effect rippled through an expectant nation hoping for a gold or at least a silver. Having weighed 49.90kg on Tuesday morning, Vinesh acquired a massive halo through the day, toppling defending champion Yui Susaki of Japan and eventually getting past Cuba's Yusnelis Guzman Lopez in the semifinal. At the mixed media zone, Vinesh waved to the scribes but refrained from having a chat. The alarm bells, though, were ringing loud and clear within the Indian contingent as Vinesh and her support staff were conscious about her latest weight being 52.7kg.

The ensuing night was all about pursuing a crash course in losing extra kilos. Extreme measures such as starvation, water being ignored, frenetic exercises and induced nausea were all attempted. Even insomnia occurred and still the weighing machine did not budge on Wednesday morning. With an original body weight of around 55kg, it was extraordinary that Vinesh even attempted to compete in the 50kg bout after finding her regular 53kg category spot resting with the emerging Antim Panghal. The United World Wrestling, the sport's governing body, is clear about the rules pertaining to body weight: if an athlete fails the weigh-in, he or she will be eliminated from the competition and ranked last. In the larger scheme, Vinesh's charge towards the victor's podium, even if it culminated in despair, was seen as a metaphor for a larger battle that she and other wrestlers waged against the former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. The allegations of sexual harassment centred around Brij Bhushan cleaved India's sporting heart; but an administrative system leaning on patriarchy, rebuffed the wrestlers before attempting a belated clean-up. Seen through that prism, the overwhelming angst over Vinesh's exit is understandable. Rules are sacrosanct, and Vinesh found herself at the wrong end and her retirement announcement has left Indian sport poorer, while she still awaits the verdict of the authorities over her appeal for a joint silver medal consideration.

Guilty on search

The antitrust case verdict against Google will have wide implications

Almost a quarter-century after an antitrust ruling against Microsoft reshaped the business landscape of tech industry, a landmark judgement by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia against Google over its anti-competitive practices could now lead to a new precedent on how Big Tech firms conduct their business affairs. The roughly three-year-long legal process – which began with the discovery procedure in January 2021 after the court consolidated two lawsuits, *United States vs Google* and *Colorado vs Google*, that led to a nine-week bench trial in September 2023 – concluded on August 5. U.S. District Judge for the District of Columbia, Amit P. Mehta, wrote that “Google is a monopolist” and that it has violated Section 2 of the Sherman Antitrust Act by stifling competition to protect its monopoly position. The search giant was accused of using its dominant position in the online search market by cutting exclusive deals with smartphone makers such as Apple and Samsung so that they can pre-load Google search on their handsets as a default search engine.

While Google plans to appeal the ruling, the U.S. Department of Justice has not yet indicated what remedy it will ask for. Both parties have been called to discuss and find a remedy ahead of their meeting with Judge Mehta on September 6. The remedy could range anywhere from breaking up Google to eliminating exclusive agreements between the search giant and handset makers. The former will fundamentally change the structure and nature of digital businesses as Google is linked to a range of digital services. The latter, on the other hand, could immediately wipe out a revenue stream for handset makers; particularly Apple could end up losing billions of dollars if Google is ordered to terminate its exclusive deal with the iPhone maker. This hefty annual payment disincentivises firms such as Apple and Samsung from building their own rival search engines. Separately, terminating such deals can help consumers find alternative search engines as opposed to getting one pre-loaded in their smartphones. The effectiveness of these alternative search engines can only be assessed over time, as scale and the amount of data that goes into them will play a key role in optimising them for richer user experiences. Lastly, these changes could make Google build a better product that is focused on user privacy. Regardless of the directions the remedies take, this ruling will have a huge impact on a series of antitrust cases that are underway against Big Tech firms such as Meta, Amazon, and Apple for their monopolistic business practices.

A moment for just transition litigation to take wing

In April 2024, in *M.K. Ranjitsinh and Others vs Union of India*, the Supreme Court of India recognised a human right against the adverse impacts of climate change. The decision has attracted significant discourse, riddled with mixed reactions. For some, it has been a win for climate action. For others, it has failed to protect endangered biodiversity. Taking a relatively pragmatic position, in an earlier opinion page article in this daily, “The Great Indian Bustard and climate action verdict” (April 17, 2024), this writer mapped a course for the Court to adopt in its final decision – which is, framing the core issue in the case using the concept of just transition.

Since the final decision of the Court is due soon, this article delves deeper into the advantages of a just transition framing, arguing that first, it will facilitate equitable and inclusive climate action. Second, it will break new ground by introducing ‘Nature’ or the non-human environment as an entity in the concept of just transition. Third, it will bolster research on just transition litigation in India by foregrounding existing cases.

Just transition is not a new concept. However, its introduction to climate change is recent. Put simply, it aims to make mitigative climate action inclusive and fair. That is, it seeks to ensure that the burdens and benefits of decarbonisation are distributed equitably.

The concept emerged in the 1970s as a tool to protect workers whose jobs were being threatened by increasing environmental regulation. Later, it was brought into the debates on climate change by the international trade union movement. In that, a direct impact of decarbonisation was on workers employed in carbon-intensive economies. In 2015, it was included in the international treaty on climate change, the Paris Agreement.

A salient report by the United States-based Sabin Center for Climate Change Law notes that in addition to workers, just transition encompasses other persons in vulnerable situations. This includes indigenous communities, women, children, and minorities. Due to their pre-existing vulnerability, they are at a higher risk of being adversely affected by decarbonisation. Accordingly, thus far, the concept only includes affected human beings. Notably, despite its vulnerability to climate change, the non-human environment has not been recognised as a subject of just transition.

Advantages of a just transition framing

The core issue in *M.K. Ranjitsinh* is the protection of an endangered bird, the Great Indian Bustard, from the adverse impacts of solar and wind energy projects. This is an opportune moment for the Court to frame the issue using just transition and further its conceptual boundaries.



Kanika Jamwal

a doctoral candidate at the Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore

Three advantages flow from taking this approach.

First, a just transition framing will allow the Court to facilitate equitable and inclusive climate action. A repeated critique of the judgment has been its framing of the core issue – the Court's decision to juxtapose decarbonisation and biodiversity protection. Interestingly, it recognises that the two ‘do not exist in disjunctive silos’, and that one cannot be prioritised at the cost of the other. Yet, it proceeds to frame them as adversarial choices – pitching the conversation of the Great Indian Bustard against conservation of the ‘environment as a whole’ (through decarbonisation). Effectively, it presents biodiversity protection as a smaller public interest in comparison to the larger public interest of decarbonising the economy.

This type of framing echoes the judiciary's existing approach in renewable energy cases. Previously, various courts have labelled decarbonisation as being the larger public benefit, while the affected plaintiff's interest being the smaller public benefit. In such cases, a just transition framing will preclude such inequitable and exclusionary climate action. It will allow courts to strengthen decarbonisation efforts, while accounting for and protecting interests of affected communities and entities. In other words, it will facilitate responsive mitigation action, which ensures that the burdens of decarbonisation are not disproportionately distributed.

Thus, given the nature of the core issue, the present case is a wonderful opportunity for the Court to import and apply the just transition concept. This will pave the way for taking a more holistic approach – while determining the feasibility of underground power transmission lines, the Court can treat protection of the Great Indian Bustard as a guiding factor. In other words, protection of the Great Indian Bustard need not to be treated as adversarial to decarbonisation. Arguably, this will set the tone for equitable and inclusive climate action.

Lastly, it must be noted that the consequence of adopting this approach may not necessarily be ‘anti-energy transition’ or ‘anti-climate’. That is, it will not translate into decommissioning renewable energy projects. In that the question before the Court is limited to determining the feasibility of placing power transmission lines underground.

A just transition framing will enable the responsible and informed operation of renewable energy projects, and not decommission them. Thus, instead of being anti-climate, this case will belong to the new category of climate litigation emerging globally, i.e., litigation which is pro-just climate action.

A second advantage is that this case provides an opportunity for the Court to expand the

concept of just transition by introducing the non-human environment as an affected entity. As mentioned earlier, theoretically, Nature does not feature as a subject in the concept, just transition. By and large, the notion of ‘affected communities’ is limited to human beings. Globally, existing just transition litigation only seeks to protect the interests of human beings.

This case presents an opportunity for the Court to develop jurisprudence on just transition and expand its scope. By applying the concept to protect an endangered bird, the non-human environment can be introduced as a separate entity in just transition. In doing so, the Court may draw on its own decadal eco-centric jurisprudence on the rights of nature; most recently in 2023, it suggested the recognition of the rights of sentient animals by the legislature. This is in addition to the copious jurisprudence from subordinate courts where constitutional rights of entire ecosystems have been recognised.

A final advantage of using the concept is that it will foreground existing just transition litigation in the country. A general consensus among climate law scholars is that just transition remains an understudied and under-researched area, both in climate law and litigation. This does not mean that just transition litigation does not exist. Rather, it has been overseen. Increasingly, climate law research is focusing on mapping just transition litigation in different regions of the world.

Given the significant number of renewable energy cases in India, a mapping exercise of just transition litigation is overdue. If the concept is introduced in the present case, it could act as a catalyst for this much-needed research. In fact, a few of these cases have already been identified as climate litigation, however, not as just transition litigation specifically. For example, they do not appear in the list of just transition cases available at the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law's Global Climate Litigation Database. Thus, if the Court uses this concept, it could facilitate relevant research geared towards filling the gap in our collective knowledge about just transition litigation.

A beacon for the future

With an increasing number of countries attempting to move towards net-zero, just transition litigation is bound to rise. As of today, Land Conflict Watch has reported 20 ongoing disputes with respect to renewable energy projects in India. Equitable sharing of burdens and benefits arising from decarbonisation is central to most of these disputes. Thus, this is a watershed moment for introducing the concept of just transition in India. Should the Court choose to do so now, it will pave the way for equitable climate action, whether taken through law or litigation.

Change in Bangladesh, the challenges for India

With events in Bangladesh unfolding at a rapid pace, this writer recalls the events of February 2009 when (now former) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina faced a major crisis within two months of her taking over. The mutiny of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), a paramilitary force, where the rebels took over the BDR's headquarters in Dhaka, left 74 dead, out of whom 57 were army officers.

The unrest spread to 12 other towns and cities and posed a direct threat to the fledgling democratically elected government of Sheikh Hasina.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon was called back from Colombo by the then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, where this writer was also present, being the Head of Division for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives. We took the only available flight, late at night, to Mumbai and then to Delhi to reach early the next morning. Within two hours, the Foreign Secretary began meeting Ambassadors of important countries to convey India's concern about the unfolding crisis and seeking their understanding in case the situation got worse.

The mutiny failed. It was bound to fail since Ms. Hasina had just come to power riding on “clean” elections with huge backing from women and youth, and without the army's interference. But in the 15 years of her tenure, all this seems to have been squandered.

A growing disconnect

The recent elections in 2024 were least inclusive with the Opposition's boycott, dwindling democratic space, an erosion of human rights, a severe economic downturn and, even more significantly, high levels of unemployment among the youth – a segment of support which had earlier benefited from the sustained economic growth under Ms. Hasina. And when the students' protests broke out, led by the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, the fact that it was handled in a ham-handed manner – almost as if they were the enemies of the state,



T.S. Tirumurti

was India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, New York and, earlier, Head of Division for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Maldives

New Delhi can capitalise on its strong development partnership with Dhaka and work closely with the interim government, the army, and the people

and which saw the use of violence – sealed Ms. Hasina's fate.

Factoring in public opinion, challenges

However, Bangladesh Army chief, General Waker-uz-Zaman, has stepped into a situation that is quite different from what existed when Gen. Moeen U. Ahmed took over in 2007 in a coup. In 2007, one needed the army to bring the anarchy and the violence that was unleashed by both the major political parties under control, restore governance and facilitate elections. The situation demanded a strong man at the top. In 2024, the army is seen more as facilitating the will of the people by driving out a beleaguered Prime Minister and restoring the democratic process. This has also made the army more vulnerable and, therefore, more responsive to public opinion.

A sign of this vulnerability is the acceptance of the students' choice of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus as the head of the interim government. Normally, coup leaders nominate lacklustre technocrats to run the country under their tight supervision, and not accept a popular leader who commands widespread respect, internally and externally. But then, the army's vulnerability may well be the silver lining which Bangladesh is looking for. Mr. Yunus is seen as a passionate supporter of democratic values and the rule of law. He is a known Hasina-baiter, on account of how she treated him. While he did nurse political ambitions and wanted to start his own political party, he is not seen to be close to the two main parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Could this be the springboard he needs to launch a third force in Bangladesh?

However, selecting the interim government is not the only task right now. There is an equally serious issue – of the students' agitation being hijacked by those suppressed under the earlier regime or who had boycotted the elections or supported from outside the country. They include not only the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the opposition but also the banned

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami which had unleashed Islamic jihadist violence in 2006-07. Violence against Awami League sympathisers and their properties continue, symbols of Bangladesh liberation including the statues of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman are being demolished, and the Hindu minority community is under attack. Accommodating such polarised forces in the interim government will weaken both Mr. Yunus and the army and, inevitably, give a fillip to anti-India forces. Will a weak army leadership be able to control these forces?

While India was the first country to flag “contemporary forms of religio-phobia against non-Abrahamic religions” in the United Nations Security Council in 2021 and in the UN General Assembly in 2022, it has demurred, raising this more forcefully with its neighbours and the West, apart from the usual expression of concern. Recent events in Bangladesh have shown, yet again, that if India does not, nobody will.

Mirroring Myanmar and the Maldives

The situation in Bangladesh is akin to events unfolding in Myanmar rather than Sri Lanka. After three consecutive elections in Myanmar, the coup leaders are finding it difficult to retain control over the people and ethnic groups and may well collapse sooner rather than later. After four consecutive elections in Bangladesh, where peoples' democratic aspirations have been raised, the military will find its role considerably circumscribed.

For India, the situation seems similar to what happened in the Maldives where it, *inter alia*, propped up President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih without building bridges to the other side and facing a backlash when the opposition came to power.

What is in its favour though, whether in the Maldives or Afghanistan or Sri Lanka, or now in Bangladesh, is the strong development partnership and projects it has built for the benefit of their peoples. India's best bet is to work closely with Mr. Yunus and the army, and with the people.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Paris
India's hockey legacy has been kept alive by the Indian team. The revival of the game is because of the support it has received from personalities such as the former Odisha Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik. One hopes that there is

more support across the country to nurture talent.
Dr. V. Purushothaman,
Chennai

Despite a year full of challenges, Vinesh Phogat fought relentlessly towards achieving her goal. Though disqualified from the

Olympics, she has proved that with a clear vision, one can overcome hurdles.
Sanjit Pal Singh,
Nawabganj, West Bengal

The loss of a medal is heartbreaking. But for Vinesh Phogat, the fact is that she has ignited a spark

in many Indian girls. Whatever the Olympics rules say, one cannot ignore her incredible performance throughout.
Ritika Mehto,
New Delhi

It was heart-wrenching to read the reports on the

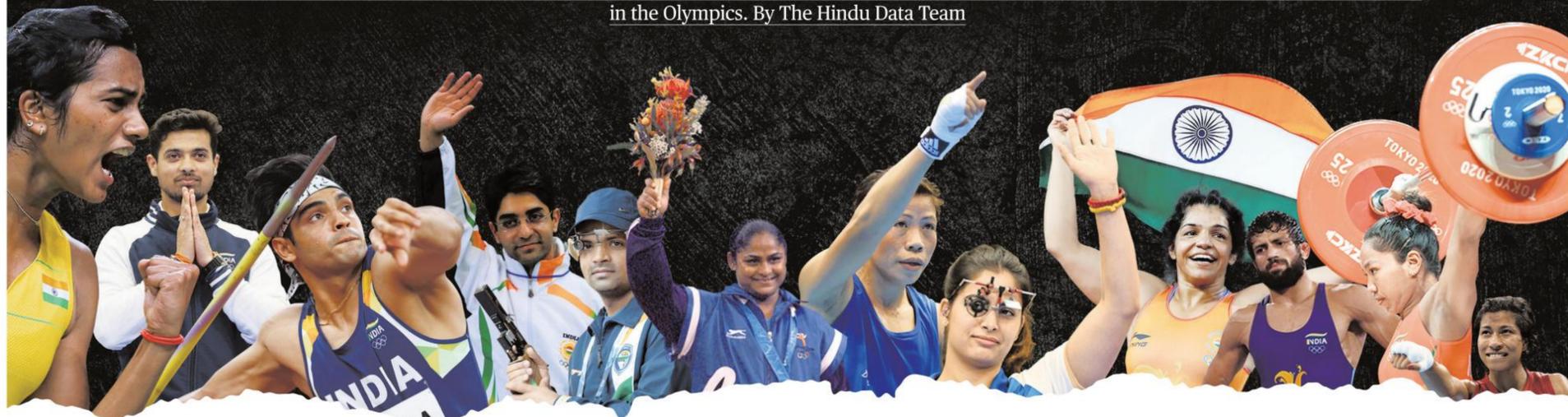
Sports page. But perseverance and dedication are what made Ms. Phogat shine like gold.
Jayasivakumar S.P.,
Chennai

The path to reach the wrestling finals in the Olympics was not a bed of

roses for Ms. Phogat. Unmindful of all the ignominy she faced at the hands of our rulers, her reaching the finals in the Olympics itself is a fitting reply to the manner in which she has been treated.
Tharcus S. Fernando,
Chennai

A widening Olympic quest

In the last seven Olympics, including 2024, India's participation has been consistent in archery, badminton, hockey and shooting. In wrestling, athletics and boxing, contenders have qualified in only some categories but there is a long way to go for participation in others. In judo, sailing, rowing, fencing, gymnastics and equestrian sports, contenders were few and far between, with no participation in as many as 20 sporting disciplines featured in the Olympics. By The Hindu Data Team



THE TABLES LIST THE NUMBER OF INDIAN CONTENDERS IN EACH EVENT ACROSS EDITIONS. BLANKS CORRESPOND TO LACK OF PARTICIPANTS. DATA WERE SOURCED FROM OLYMPICS.COM

Archery



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men's individual (I)		3	1	3	1	3	3
Men's team		3		3		3	3
Mixed team						2	2
Women's (I)		3	3	3	3	1	3
Women's team		3	3	3	3		3

Archery has seen consistent participation over the years, culminating in contestation in all events (with 2 or more players) in Paris 2024

Badminton



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men's singles	1	2	1	1	1	1	2
Men's doubles					2	2	2
Mixed doubles				2			
Women's singles	1	1	1	1	2	1	1
Women's doubles				2	2		2

In badminton, singles events have witnessed regular qualification, while contenders in the doubles events have picked up only in recent editions

Hockey



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men	16	16		18	18	18	19
Women					17	16	

While the men's team managed to qualify to all editions, except 2008, the women's team competed in only two of the last seven editions

Shooting



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men cat. 1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
Men cat. 2	1	2	2	1	2	2	2
Men cat. 3		1	2	1	2	2	2
Men cat. 4			2	1	2	2	2
Men cat. 5		1	2	2			1
Men cat. 6		1	2	2			
Men cat. 7			1	2	1		
Men cat. 8					1		
Men cat. 9-10							
Mixed cat. 1						2	4
Mixed cat. 2						2	4
Mixed cat. 3							2
Women cat. 1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2
Women cat. 2		2	2	2	1	2	2
Women cat. 3				1	1	2	2
Women cat. 4					2	2	
Women cat. 5						2	
Women cat. 6						2	
Women cat. 7							

In shooting, Indians have consistently qualified for most events across editions. The number of events in which Indians participated has also increased over the editions. This is especially so among women and in mixed events where participation has surged in recent years

In the table, the categories which did not record any contender from India are clubbed together (cat. = categories in the tables)

Wrestling



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men cat. 1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 2		1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 3		1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 4		1		1	1		
Men cat. 5		1					
Men cat. 6		1					
Men cat. 7		1					
Men cat. 8-16							
Women cat. 1				1	1	1	1
Women cat. 2					1	1	1
Women cat. 3					1	1	1
Women cat. 4					1	1	
Women cat. 5						1	
Women cat. 6-8							

While increasingly more women have qualified for wrestling events, the number of male contenders have declined. Moreover, there is still scope for improvement as many events have not recorded any participation at all

In the table, the categories which did not record any contender from India are clubbed together (cat. = categories in the tables)

Athletics



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men's 10000m				1			
Men's 100m							
Men's 110m hurdles							
Men's 1500m							
Men's 200m							
Men's 20km race walk				3	3	3	3
Men's 3000m steeplechase						1	1
Men's 4 x 100m (R)	4						
Men's 4 x 400m (R)	4				6	5	5
Men's 400m	1	1			1		
Men's 400m hurdles						1	
Men's 5000m							
Men's 50km race walk				1	1	1	
Men's 800m					1		
Men's decathlon							
Men's discus throw		2	1	1	1		
Men's hammer throw							1
Men's high jump							2
Men's javelin throw	1					2	2
Men's long jump					1	1	1
Men's Marathon				1	3		
Men's pole vault							
Men's shot put	2	1		1	1	1	1
Men's triple jump			1	1	1		2
4 x 400m (R) mixed						4	
Marathon race walk (R) mixed							2
Women's 10000m			1				
Women's 100m					1	1	
Women's 100m hurdles							1
Women's 1500m							
Women's 200m		1			1	1	
Women's 20km race walk					2	2	1
Women's 3000m steeplechase					1	2	1
Women's 4 x 100m (R)	4						
Women's 4 x 400m (R)	4	5	5		7		4
Women's 400m	1		1		1		1
Women's 400m hurdles							1
Women's 5000m							2
Women's 800m				1	1		
Women's discus throw		1	3	2	2	1	2
Women's hammer throw							
Women's heptathlon		2	2	3			
Women's high jump		1		1			
Women's javelin throw	1					1	1
Women's long jump		1	1				
Women's marathon						2	
Women's pole vault							
Women's shot put						1	
Women's triple jump				1			

In athletics, some events such as women's discus throw and men's shot put have recorded consistent participation with a few misses across editions

Many events such as men's 100m, men's 110m hurdles, men's 1500m, men's 200m races have not recorded any participation in the last seven Olympics including the 2024 edition

Events such as men's hammer throw, men's pole vault, men's decathlon, have also not seen any participants

Among women, 4x400m relay has recorded consistent participation in most editions. In other sports, the number of contenders have been few and far between. Participation in heptathlon has also dwindled over the years

Among women, participants have not qualified for pole vault, hammer throw and the 1500m ever race

In the tables (R) corresponds to Relay

Boxing



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men cat. 1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Men cat. 4		1	1	1	1		
Men cat. 5			1	1		1	
Men cat. 6				1			
Men cat. 7				1			
Men cat. 8-12							
Women cat. 1				1		1	1
Women cat. 2						1	1
Women cat. 3						1	1
Women cat. 4						1	1
Women cat. 5-6							

In boxing, similar to shooting, Indians have consistently qualified for most events across editions. However, the number of contenders among men have declined in the recent years. In contrast, the number of participants among women has surged in the last two editions

Table Tennis



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men's singles	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Men's team							3
Mixed doubles						2	
Women's singles	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
Women's team							3

In table tennis, there has been consistent participation over the years in singles events, which that for doubles events has picked up in the latest edition

Tennis



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men's singles	1			2		1	1
Men's doubles	2	2	2	4	2		2
Mixed doubles				2	2		
Women's singles			1				
Women's doubles	2		2	2	2	2	

While participation in men's doubles has remained consistent, the 2024 edition did not see any entry in women's doubles, after Sania Mirza's exit. It is a different story in singles events

Swimming



Event	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016	2020	2024
Men cat. 1	1			1	1	1	1
Men cat. 2			1				
Men cat. 3			1			1	
Men cat. 4			1				
Men cat. 5			1				
Men cat. 6			1				
Men cat. 7			1				
Men Cat. 8-17							
Women cat. 1	1	1			1	1	1
Women cat. 2		1					
Women Cat. 3-17							

The 2008 edition saw Indians participating in the most number of events. Since then the record has remained poor. In most of the editions men have qualified for only one to three events among 16 to 17 events. Participation among women has also been similarly poor

DESIGNED BY SANKAR GANESH T
DATA COMPILED BY VIGNESH RADHAKRISHNAN, SAMBAVI PARTHASARATHY, JASMIN NIHALANI AND NITIKA FRANCIS, SRINIVASAN RAMANI AND R. AMANDA MIRIAM FERNANDEZ, MOHAMMED AMJADH SHAH M., MOHAMED ANAS Z., THALAMUTHUKUMAR T. WHO ARE INTERNING WITH THE HINDU DATA TEAM

EVENTS WITH FEWER PARTICIPANTS, AND NEWER SPORTS

Weightlifting



Despite Karnam Malleswari winning a bronze in 2000 and Saikhom Mirabai Chanu winning a silver in 2020, the number of contenders in this sport has remained minimal, especially among men

Equestrian



In this sport, in the last seven Olympic editions, including 2024, only two have qualified from India, one each in Dressage and Eventing

Golf



Golf, which was recently re-introduced in the 2016 Olympics, has seen consistent participation from Indian men and women

Fencing



In the last seven editions, only one Indian has qualified in this sport: C.A. Bhavani Devi from Tamil Nadu who participated in the 2020 edition

Judo



More women compared to men have qualified to take part in recent editions, even as overall participation has remained poor

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The death toll from the monsoon rains in Pakistan

154 The death toll from nearly six weeks of monsoon rains and floods across Pakistan has risen to 154, officials said on Thursday. More than 1,500 homes have been damaged since July 1, when the monsoon rains began. AFP

Reserve Bank of India's growth projection for this fiscal

7.2 in per cent. The RBI retained the inflation projection at 4.5% for the current fiscal amid expectations of a normal monsoon. On inflation, Shaktikanta Das said, a relief in food inflation is expected from the pick-up in the south-west monsoon. PTI

India's forex reserves touch a record high, says RBI Governor

675 in \$ billion. The previous all-time high for the kitty was \$670.857 billion on July 19. Gross foreign direct investment rose by more than 20% in April-May, while net FDI flows doubled during this period compared to the year-ago period. PTI

The kilometres by which Ukraine has advanced into Russia

10 Ukrainian troops' advancement into Russia is likely the most serious border incursion of the conflict, the Institute for the Study of War said. Pro-Kyiv forces stormed into Russia's southwestern Kursk region on Tuesday morning. AFP

The chance of La Niña weather pattern to emerge in Sept.-Nov.

66 in per cent. La Niña, characterised by cooler-than-average ocean temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific, is associated with floods and droughts. REUTERS
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On monetary policy and financial markets

The recent rapid turnarounds in global markets have come on the back of attempts by central banks to combat the problems of inflation and repressed economic activity using the tool of interest rates. It indicates the difficulty in implementing monetary policy in the presence of strong financial markets

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rahul Menon

Global financial markets may be exhibiting recovery following the dramatic falls in value, but the global economy is still in uncharted waters. Employment generation in the U.S. has been weaker than expected, threatening the fragile post-pandemic recovery. The Bank of Japan's decision to raise interest rates after years of keeping them low has also rattled financial markets, setting off a reversal of equity flows and a collapse in Asian markets. These rapid turnarounds have come on the back of attempts by central banks to combat the problems of inflation and repressed economic activity using the tool of interest rates. What the current situation indicates is the difficulty in implementing monetary policy in the presence of global financial markets, where expectations display heightened volatility and large-scale drops in asset values can occur much faster than the ability of policy-makers to respond.

Was there a threat of recession? The current consensus regarding monetary policy is to assume a trade-off between unemployment and inflation. Central banks raise interest rates as inflation rises, reducing investment and hence slowing aggregate demand. This leads to a reduction in the demand for labour, reducing the ability of wage-earners to push for higher wages, and ease inflationary pressures.

There is, of course, a lot to debate regarding the proper conduct of monetary policy. Several have criticised the normal conduct of monetary policy, stressing that solving inflation by increasing unemployment represents an unfair burden being placed on workers everywhere, who are already grappling with a cost-of-living crisis. Instead, they argue, inflation could be better tamed by forcing companies to reduce their profit



GETTY IMAGES

margins and by breaking monopolies. Let us accept the current consensus regarding the conduct of monetary policy. The release of a jobs report that showed a less-than-expected increase in employment led to fears of a recession, and caused a rapid sell-off of equity stocks. This, coupled with concerns regarding the less-than-expected performance of big tech giants, led to a rout in the stock markets.

What is of note is that the economy wasn't actually in a recession, the market just expected one to occur. The rise in unemployment rates triggered the "Sahm rule" which mandates the automatic disbursement of unemployment checks to households when the increase in unemployment rates breaches a certain threshold. This measure is not an indicator that the economy has entered recession, but is correlated with one. However, correlation does not always

indicate certainty; the economy may be displaying the potential for recession, but the threat of a future recession was enough to spark fear amongst investors. This indicates one of the problems of conducting monetary policy in the presence of a strong financial sector. The gradual reduction of inflation was being held as proof of the successful conduct of monetary policy. Less-than-expected performance in terms of employment creation in one quarter alone has caused financial markets to react and respond at a pace that is too fast for policy-makers to deal with. The market has acted on the expectation that a recession will occur without the economy ever being in one.

The carry trade On the other side of the world, Asian markets were rattled by the increase in interest rates by the Japanese Central Bank following long periods of low rates.

A long period of economic slowdown in Japan has led to central banks keeping interest rates at levels close to 0. Low Japanese interest rates have led to what is known as the "carry trade", where foreign investors take advantage of low rates to borrow from Japan and invest in foreign markets. The increase in interest rates caused a disruption in this form of trade, leading to investors selling stocks in other markets to deal with higher borrowing costs. This, it has been said, has added to selling pressures in other markets.

This represents an added complication for policy. Low interest rates in Japan to combat a decades-long slowdown indirectly subsidised the activities of foreign capital. Domestic policy imperatives of certain economies exercise undue effects on other economies through the action of global finance.

This is not the first time the actions of global finance caused difficulties for domestic policy in other countries. Interest rates in the U.S. were low following the great recession in 2008. This led to investors borrowing at cheap rates in the U.S. and investing in other markets like India. As interest rates in the U.S. rose following a resumption of growth, capital flew out from India, leading to pressure on its external account: this was called "taper tantrum".

Monetary policy in financial markets Financial markets have shown signs of recovery following these intense bouts of selling pressure, with many claiming that threats of recession are overblown, even though vulnerabilities remain. But these incidents highlight the potentially destabilising nature of finance. The speed with which financial assets can be bought and sold and the ease at which national borders can be traversed, represents burdens upon the normal conduct of monetary policy. As Keynes once said, "When the capital development of a country becomes a by-product of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done."

Rahul Menon is Associate Professor at O.P. Jindal Global University.

THE GIST

The Bank of Japan's decision to raise interest rates after years of keeping them low has rattled financial markets, setting off a reversal of equity flows and a collapse in Asian markets.

The current consensus regarding monetary policy is to assume a trade-off between unemployment and inflation. Central banks raise interest rates as inflation rises, reducing investment and hence slowing aggregate demand. This leads to a reduction in the demand for labour, reducing the ability of wage-earners to push for higher wages, and ease inflationary pressures.

Financial markets have shown signs of recovery following these intense bouts of selling pressure, with many claiming that threats of recession are overblown, even though vulnerabilities remain.

Why Himalayan towns need a different kind of development

Do cities along the Indian Himalayan Range have adequate funds and resources to manage civic issues?

Tikender Singh Panwar

The story so far:

The Indian Himalayan Range (IHR), comprising 11 States and two Union Territories, had a decadal urban growth rate of more than 40% from 2011 to 2021. Towns have expanded, and more urban settlements are developing. However, Himalayan towns require a different definition of urbanisation.

What is happening in IHR towns? Almost all Himalayan towns, including State capitals, struggle with managing civic issues. For example, cities like Srinagar, Guwahati, Shillong, and Shimla, as well as smaller towns, face significant challenges in managing sanitation, solid and liquid waste, and water. Planning institutions in these States often fail because they use models copied from the plains and have only limited capacities to implement these plans. City governments

are short of human resources by almost 75%. For instance, in the Kashmir Valley, excluding the Srinagar Municipal Corporation, there are only 15 executive officers across over 40 urban local bodies. Cities continue to expand into the peripheries, encroaching on the commons of villages. Srinagar, Guwahati are examples of such expansion, leading to the plundering of open spaces, forest land, and watersheds. In Srinagar, land use changes between 2000 and 2020 showed a 75.58% increase. Water bodies have eroded by almost 25%, from 19.36 square kilometres to 14.44 square kilometres. These areas have been taken over by built-up real estate, increasing from 34.53 square kilometres to 60.63 square kilometres, a rise from 13.35% to 23.44% of the total municipal area. Nearly 90% of the liquid waste enters water bodies without treatment.

urbanisation and development, compounded by high-intensity tourism, unsustainable infrastructure, and resource use (land and water), further aggravated by climatic variations like changing precipitation patterns and rising temperatures. This has led to water scarcity, deforestation, land degradation, biodiversity loss, and increased pollution, including plastics. These pressures have the potential to disrupt lives and livelihoods, impacting the socio-ecological fabric of the Himalayas. Over the past few decades, tourism in the IHR has continued to expand and diversify, with an anticipated average annual growth rate of 7.9% from 2013 to 2023. Current tourism in the IHR often replaces eco-friendly infrastructure with inappropriate, unsightly, and dangerous constructions, poorly designed roads, and inadequate solid waste management, which leads to loss of natural resources damaging biodiversity and ecosystem services. Ecotourism, emphasising

Why is this happening? The IHR faces increasing pressure from

environmentally friendly tourism, is crucial for long-term sustainability.

What needs to be done?

Planning institutions in IHR cities are still guided by land-use principles. Every town needs to be mapped, with layers identifying vulnerabilities from geological and hydrological perspectives. Climate-induced disasters annually erode infrastructures built without such mapping. Therefore, the planning process should involve locals and follow a bottom-up approach.

Consultant-driven urban planning processes should be shelved for Himalayan towns, with the urban design based on climate resilience.

Additionally, none of the cities in the IHR can generate capital for their infrastructure needs. The Finance Commission must include a separate chapter on urban financing for the IHR. The high costs of urban services and the lack of industrial corridors place these towns in a unique financial situation. Current intergovernmental transfers from the centre to urban local bodies constitute a mere 0.5% of GDP; this should be increased to at least 1%. Himalayan towns must engage in wider conversations about sustainability, with the focus on urban futures being through robust, eco-centric planning processes involving public participation.

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

THE GIST

Cities like Srinagar, Guwahati, Shillong, and Shimla, as well as smaller towns, face significant challenges in managing sanitation, solid and liquid waste, and water.

The IHR faces increasing pressure from urbanisation and development, compounded by high-intensity tourism, unsustainable infrastructure, and resource use (land and water), further aggravated by climatic variations like changing precipitation patterns and rising temperatures.

Planning institutions in IHR cities are still guided by land-use principles. Every town needs to be mapped, with layers identifying vulnerabilities from geological and hydrological perspectives.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from *Gladiator*.

The comeback of epic movies, albeit without imagination

Sword-and-sandal sagas are seeing yet another revival with the recent series, *Those About to Die*, and the November release of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator II*. A look at how the depictions of the classical age have changed thanks to CGI and millennial sensibilities

Mini Anthikad Chhibber

In the beginning there was, no, not the word, though that too was there, but we are talking of the beginning of Hollywood's mining of The Bible for spectacle on screen – therefore, in the beginning there was the Word. The '50s and '60s were the golden age of epic spectacle in Hollywood with 1959's *Ben-Hur* being the jewel in the multi-hued crown.

The naval battle and the chariot race still rocks as does Charlton Heston as the Jewish Prince who is done wrong by his best friend turned nasty foe, the Roman Messala (Stephen Boyd). *Ben-Hur's* roaring rampage of revenge is only staunch when he witnesses Christ forgiving those who crucified him from the cross.

The golden age

While some of the stories from those days were taken from The Bible, including Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) with Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr and *The Ten Commandments* (1956) starring Heston as Moses, another prince in search of his legacy, and the scalding hot Yul Brynner as Rameses and Anne Baxter as Nefertiri, there were others that were Bible adjacent.

The Robe (1953), has Richard Burton playing the Tribune who commands the unit that crucifies Christ and how that

experience changes him. *Quo Vadis* (1951), set during the final years of Emperor Nero's reign was the greatest fun for Peter Ustinov's turn as the Emperor – I can see him staring through the emerald in my mind's eye. *Quo Vadis*, meaning "whither goes thou", are the first words St Peter said to risen Christ on the Appian Way.

Stanley Kubrick, as always marched to his own drum, and with *Spartacus* (1960), he did so in a spectacularly quiet way. Set according to the voice over, "In the last century before the birth of the new faith called Christianity," the film about a slave, who became a gladiator and led a rebellion against the pagan Romans (yes, yes, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* also follows similar beats) stars Kirk Douglas of the delicious cleft chin as Spartacus. Ustinov has fun as Batiatus, who recruits Spartacus into his gladiatorial school but it is Laurence Olivier as Crassus and his famous bathtub exit line to his slave, "My tastes include both snails and oysters," that shocked and thrilled film goers.

A digital turn

The millennium saw a resurgence of swords and togas starting with Scott's multiple-Oscar winning *Gladiator* in 2000. The Christian overtones were done away with as we all bowed and prayed to the digital deity we made and CGI was king. From increasing the height of a model of the Colosseum, to shooting animals against a green screen and

compositing them to the frames later on, all kinds of VFX magic was bought to bear. Russell Crowe played Maximus, a Roman general forced into slavery, while Joaquin Phoenix is much more fun as wicked, incestuous Emperor Commodus, than a certain clown with a frown.

The Biblical epic saw a return 10 years ago, with Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) where Crowe played the Old Testament patriarch as well as reboots of *The Ten Commandments* and *Ben-Hur*. Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) featured Christian Bale as Moses crossing swords with Joel Edgerton's Ramses II. Scott's *Alien* star, Sigourney Weaver, was also in the film as Queen Tuya. Timur Bekmambetov's *Ben-Hur* (2016) starring Jack Huston and Toby Kebbell as Ben-Hur and Messala, was not much fun.

A lack of imagination

Paul W. S. Anderson's *Pompeii*, also in 2014 was epically dreadful. Set against the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD, the film starred *Game of Thrones'* Kit Harington as a gladiator yada yada. Carrie-Anne Moss and Kiefer Sutherland, among others, looked like they desperately wanted to be smothered by the ash from Vesuvius. The film also proved that no matter how great the technical advances, nothing could take the place of imagination, which is comforting in a way, for the day AI can create a gripping film is the day Skynet

truly takes over.

Ancient Greece and Rome featured better on the small screen with HBO's *Rome* charting the power struggles during Julius Caesar's time over two well regarded seasons and Starz' *Spartacus*. The latter created by Sam Raimi, told the story of the slave general who took on the might of the Roman empire over three excellent seasons.

Rome during Julius Caesar provides much fodder for drama with its battles, political maneuvering and crisis of faith about the divine rights of kings. Caesar took Rome to the pinnacle with his conquests and public works but also paved the way for its ruin, with the formula of bread and circuses

Those About To Die, which dropped on Amazon Prime Video last month, while loosely inspired by Daniel P. Mannix's eponymous book, which also served as the inspiration for *Gladiator* was toe-curlingly bad, with CGI not backed by any imagination. Hopefully, *Gladiator II*, also directed by Scott starring Paul Mescal, Pedro Pascal, Connie Nielsen, and Denzel Washington, will prove to be a perfect blend of state-of-the-art VFX and imagination. If not, we can always go back to *Ben-Hur*, the galley slave number 41, the exhilarating naval battle, and the goose-bump inducing chariot race. Incidentally, the chariot race finds echoes in the galaxy far, far away in Anakin's pod race in *The Phantom Menace*, no?

THE DAILY QUIZ

With political chaos and a government in crisis, Bangladesh has dominated the news in recent time. How well do you know our neighbouring country?

Venkatraghavan.S

QUESTION 1

What is the name of the highest civilian award in Bangladesh, equivalent to the Bharat Ratna in India?

QUESTION 2

Which river, arguably the largest in South Asia, flows through Bangladesh and is known as the Padma in the country?

QUESTION 3

What is the name of the traditional craft of Bangladesh where artisans create beautiful, intricate designs on textiles using a resist-dyeing technique?

QUESTION 4

Similar to the Boat festival in Kerala,

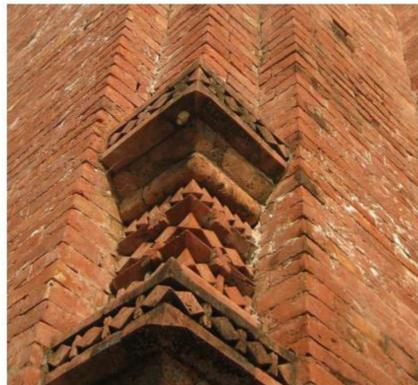
there is a Bangladeshi festival that involves colorful boat races and is celebrated with much enthusiasm. What is it known as?

QUESTION 5

Who were the organisers of the "Concert for Bangladesh", on August 1, 1971, at Madison Square Garden in New York City. The aim was to raise international awareness and funds for refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the Bangladesh Liberation War and the Bhola cyclone in 1970.

QUESTION 6

The Grameen Bank was founded by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus in 1983. What was the unique characteristic of its approach to lending, particularly in the context of its borrowers?



Visual question:

Which UNESCO World Heritage Site in Bangladesh is famous for its intricate terracotta Hindu temples from the medieval period?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. A Career Golden Slam. **Ans: A player who wins all four majors and the Olympic gold medal during their professional career is said to have achieved a "Career Golden Slam".**

2. The players who have achieved a Career Golden Slam in Men's and Women's singles. **Ans: There are five. Steffi Graf, Andre Agassi, Rafael Nadal, Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic**

3. This is the only tennis player to achieve the Golden Slam, by winning all four major singles titles and the Olympic gold medal in the same calendar year. **Ans: Steffi Graf**

4. This American former world no. 1 tennis player was known as "The Punisher". **Ans: Andre Agassi**

5. This American tennis player is the only player to accomplish a Career Golden Slam in both singles and doubles. **Ans: Serena Williams**

6. At 24, this player became the youngest man in the Open Era to achieve the Career Grand Slam. **Ans: Rafael Nadal**
Visual: Nole refers to which player. **Ans: Novak Djokovic**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Vineet Giri| Anju Sharma| Tamal Biswas| Debarati Kar



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Shall we continue with our spelling rules?"

"No, I'm not really in the mood."

"Oh, come on! Stop being a refusenik."

"A what?"

"A refusenik."

"What is a refusenik?"

"Not what, but who?"

"All right. Who is a refusenik?"

"A refusenik is a person who is unwilling to cooperate with others; he is a dissident. For example, I don't want Ramdas to be part of our team. He is a refusenik."

The strike was a total failure. The Union leaders never thought there would be so many refuseniks.

"You said last week that you would discuss some more meanings of 'spell.'"

"Thanks for reminding me. One of the meanings of 'spell' is 'result in,' to add up to something, usually unpleasant".

The government's action spells disaster for the private sector.

Another meaning is 'short or a fairly short period.'

We had a warm spell in December.

It also means 'a period spent in a job or occupation'.

He did a spell in teaching before he became a journalist.

'Spell' is also used to mean 'a sudden brief attack or fit of dizziness, shivering, coughing etc'. For example, coughing spell, dizzy spell. 'Spell out' means to say aloud or write the letters of a word in their correct order.

Please spell out the word 'accommodate.'

It also means to explain in the clearest or most detailed way.

This report spells out the company's plans for next year.

"Who is a speller?"

"A speller is one who spells words.

Some are good spellers and some are poor spellers. A book with exercises for learning spelling is also called a speller. Now are you in a mood to discuss spelling rules?"

"Yes. I don't want to be considered a refusenik."

"OK. Just one simple rule. When the suffix 'full' is added to a word, the final 'l' in 'full' is dropped. Mind plus full – mindful. Sinful; tearful, fateful. When the word itself ends in 'll', the final 'l' in the word is also dropped. Skill plus full – skilful. Will plus full willful."

"Thank you. I must go now."

"OK. See you next week."

Published in The Hindu on December 22, 1992.

Word of the day

Insinuate: introduce or insert (oneself) in a subtle manner; give to understand

Synonyms: intimate, adumbrate

Usage: I insinuated that I did not like his wife.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/insinuatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ɪnˈsɪnjuːeɪt/

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

Telcos, Don't Forget Customer Service

Stricter service quality rules key to growth

New rules on the quality of telecom services seeking granular disclosures at greater frequency, and increased fines for delinquency, are being disputed by the industry on the grounds that these will raise operating costs without significantly benefiting consumers. This argument is difficult to comprehend. The rules were framed in consultation with the industry and are being updated after a gap during which telecom services have evolved. Latest-generation cellular networks have enormous transformative potential for economic productivity, which may not be met if service quality remains subpar. The new rules are being imposed with a lag to enable telecom companies to roll out 5G networks rapidly.

Govt has done its bit to help telcos to upgrade their networks. Spectrum can now be bought in instalments. Financial stress in the industry has been eased by a relief package that includes swapping debt for equity. Infra issues that impede network rollout are being addressed in consultation with local bodies. Telcos have regained some pricing discipline after a bruising price war. Rising data consumption is providing ballast to industry revenue. India has had a rapid rollout of 5G networks, and the telecom sector's health is on the mend.

This is an opportune juncture to place stricter rules designed to keep the industry on a high-growth strategy. Competitive intensity must diversify from price to quality, and the telecom regulatory is aiding the process by raising the bar on issues such as outages, call drops and latency. Telcos have pointed out exogenous factors that affect expected service quality. Still, the regulator is not convinced these are of an order for consumers to settle for less. Telecom usage, especially data traffic among machines, is poised to grow exponentially, and consumers need to be compensated for downtime or slow internet. Enterprise consumers will need these guard rails before they commit more of their processes to the cloud.

More Elbow Room For Homeowners

Grandfathering provision for LTCG tax on property purchases before July 23, 2024, will provide relief to a large segment of homeowners. Since Govt's intent in moving to a uniform LTCG tax across asset classes was not revenue-driven, the rethink over indexation benefits on housing investments should smoothen the transition to the new system.

Going forward, however, the new tax structure could affect holding periods, disclosure levels and liquidity in the housing market. These can be addressed through specific countermeasures. Broadly, the gov should not be bearing the inflation risk of any investment. It is justified to not allow grandfathering provisions among other asset classes, such as gold. Low and uniform LTCG tax rates across financial and non-financial investments will help steer household savings towards more productive areas of the economy, thereby improving investor choice.

The carveout for housing investments is influenced by the scale of current household savings locked up in property and the low retail exposure to equity. Household saving trends are displaying a tendency to balance the anomaly, and the new LTCG tax should aid the process. Prospective property investors will weigh the tax-adjusted returns from alternative asset classes, where equity has delivered superior results. Changes in investment preferences aid financialisation and formalisation of the economy. It also lowers the pressure on the current account for an energy- and resource-constrained economy. The grandfathering provision allows households more elbow room to extract savings from the property for investment in preferred financial assets. Yet, a large part of the country's housing stock will remain locked in inflation-indexed capital gains.

JUST IN JEST
Be careful what you wish for when asking for commemorative essays

Sharing Our Concern With Subdued Vigour

One can, of course, make things like this up. Except, in this case, it isn't. IIT Kharagpur authorities have reportedly sent out a mail to the institute's students asking them to participate in an essay competition to commemorate Narendra Modi's 74th birthday on September 17. Nothing wrong with that at all, considering our socialist-Sovietesque past has always been extra enthusiastic about commemorating our political leaders from Nehru-Gandhi (Mohandas and Indira) times. The subject of the essay competition, 'How Prime Minister Narendra Modi Strengthened India's Global Relations', is also kosher. Similar mails have reportedly been sent out in other institutions, other IITs included. Nothing like a bit of 750-800 words essaying to make those nation-building juices flowing properly.

Our niggles is with something else, admittedly minor. The mail on behalf of the Technology Students' Gymkhana states, 'The director wishes our students to participate with full vigour so that we are able to bag the first prize in the competition.' Why 'with full vigour'? That too asking young students brimming with hormonal harmonics to write 'with full vigour'? Perhaps English renders 'puray dum se' with a different tonality, one that may be liable to be mis/overinterpreted by students with more than full enthusiasm. No, we aren't overly worried, just wary.

TECHNIK Don't force-fit the broadcast Bill into an outdated construct of cable television

Unclejis, Internet Samajhiye



Nikhil Pahwa

Jimmy Donaldson, a.k.a. MrBeast, runs the world's most subscribed YouTube channel with 307 mn subscribers. Known for generosity and stunts, he spent 24 hrs in an ice house, and gave away 26 Teslas on his 26th birthday and \$5 mn to help 2,000 amputees walk last year.

If India's attempt at mass-regulation of online content via the draft broadcast Bill becomes law, MrBeast will have to register as an 'OTT broadcaster' with Govt, set up a grievance redressal system, join a 'self-regulatory organisation' chaired by a retired Indian judge, and set up a content evaluation committee, comprising advocates for women and child welfare, SCs, STs and minority communities to certify the content before he uploads it on YouTube.

Others like Virat Kohli on Instagram, Technical Guruji on YouTube, Anand Mahindra on Twitter and even smaller content creators on YouTube will need to bear the pain of such onerous compliance if they cross an as-yet unspecified threshold, and if their activities are seen to be a part of a 'systematic business activity', including marketing. It would impact Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who recently crossed 100 mn followers on X, posting about government initiatives.

The latest version of the draft Bill, which has not yet been released for public consultation, also ensnares in its regressive net people posting about news and current affairs on social media, both in India and abroad. While spared the overhead of setting up a content evaluation committee, they'll still need to comply with



Not too door-darshan, is it?

the other requirements.

Anyone creating news-related content, including analysis, anywhere in the world will have to sign up: if you run Google Ads on your blog, where you might write about the US presidential election, chances are you'll be seen as a digital news broadcaster and regulated in India. You will have to comply with an advertising and programming code, which is yet to be defined. For both OTT and digital news broadcasters, a broadcast advisory council will handle user complaints if not addressed at the previous two or three levels.

The absurdity of such expectations illustrates how out-of-touch the I&B ministry is with how the internet works, trying to force-fit it into the outdated construct of cable TV.

In a country where people struggle to find jobs, many are becoming online content creators to earn an income. What starts as a hobby or a side gig becomes a career. The draft Bill sets out to kill that dream. Let's not forget the impact that Govt's content regulations have had in the past: following the Information Technology (IT) Rules 2021, both Yahoo News and Huffington Post ceased operations in India. Compliance burdens that render organisations unviable, or prevent people from becoming online creators, are a form of censorship in themselves, especially when the country has laws that regulate illegal speech, and defamation is, unfortunately, still a criminal offence.

The solution to the lack of enforcement isn't the creation of laws that will also be arbitrarily enforced. In a country as diverse as India, a 3- or 4-tier content evaluation regime will lead to a homogenised and less-diverse media landscape. Mass regulation will stifle creativity and freedom of expression.

One can argue that following IT Rules 2021, there is already self-censorship, especially in the case of streaming services. Various high courts have already stayed parts of the Rules, and while we still await verdicts that address some of those restrictions, Govt continues to make regula-

tions and laws restricting our freedoms faster than courts undo them. Govt plans to create additional rules for online advertising and social media platforms, which could well involve censorship or blocking and demonetisation of non-compliant online creators. The draft Bill does empower Govt to direct ISPs or social media platforms to enforce compliance with this Bill, which could lead to censorship.

Fundamental to this issue of online speech regulation via the Bill is the question of how online content should be treated. Is streaming the same as broadcasting?

Streaming is much more than consumption—it can be interactive and engaging, with multiple participants. Unlike broadcast, which is a one-to-many communication to the public, streaming is also one-to-one communication. It is also 'pull content'—we seek out the content we view. It's typically viewed on our private devices, often in the privacy of our bedrooms, unlike cinema, which is viewed in public. It cannot be treated the same as cable TV.

In August 2015, then-attorney-general Mukul Rohatgi responded to a petition to ban pornography by highlighting that 'Geographic frontiers are no longer frontiers' when it comes to online content, adding that 'if someone wants to watch in the privacy of their bedroom, how can we stop that? These are now issues of 19(1) [Freedom of Speech]'.

'We don't want to become a moral police,' he had said. The I&B ministry would do well to heed his words.

The writer is founder, MediaNama

Bangladesh, a Basketcase Study



Amit Bhandari

Deteriorating economic conditions may have been one of the driving factors for the recent protests and regime change in Bangladesh. While the country is often hailed as the most vibrant economy in South Asia, it's behind India, and even other sub-operational countries like Pakistan, on several important metrics. The political developments and instability will likely reduce growth and investment in Bangladesh, further increasing economic hardship.

Just four years ago, Bangladesh was the envy of Asia, with a GDP growth of 8.4%. In 2015, the country's per-capita income crossed Pakistan's, and in 2020, it overtook India's as well. A deeper assessment reveals that these and other numbers may have been overstated as they don't

match other economic indicators. According to IMF, Bangladesh's per-capita income in 2024 at \$2,650 is close to India's per-capita income of \$2,730. Logically, then, Bangladesh's consumption metrics should be somewhat comparable to India's. This is not the case.

► **Not-so-hot wheels** Automobile sales in India are 3.5 lakh a month. Bangladesh's population is 1/8th of India's. Ideally, automobile sales should be in the range of 40k a month. The actual figure is just 1,000 a month.

► **Sapped energy** Bangladesh's per-capita energy consumption—which measures total energy consumption across all fuel types—is less than half that of India. In fact, Pakistan's per-capita energy consumption is higher than Bangladesh's, even though the latter's per-capita income is nearly twice that of Pakistan.

► **Wrong weave** Bangladesh's textile sector, its top industry, saw a major strike in Oct-Nov 2023 with workers agitating for higher wages. After weeks of protests, the government agreed to revise the minimum wage upwards by 56% to 12,500 taka a mon-



Dhaka's ground reality's different

th (equivalent to \$115 a month at the time) to partly offset the higher cost of living. This figure is marginally higher than the minimum wage for unskilled labour in West Bengal, and is lower than the official minimum wage in Bihar.

► **Spiralling costs** In the last three years, the Bangladesh taka has fallen by almost 30% against the dollar. The commodity price hike in 2022, caused by the Ukraine conflict, hit Bangladesh particularly hard. As a resource-poor country, it depends upon imports of food, fuel, fertiliser and other resources. Devaluation of the currency indicates higher prices of imported goods, resulting in higher inflation.

► **BoP problem** Bangladesh's forex has declined over the past two years.

This pushed the government to clamp down on 'non-essential' imports, another indication of economic trouble. Sri Lanka and Pakistan followed similar policies when their forex started to run dangerously low, to less than two months of import cover. Official portals have been inaccessible since August 5, so the latest data is unavailable. Trouble on the external front has been evident for at least two years, as Bangladesh went for a \$3.2 bn support programme from IMF in November 2022 to help stabilise BoP.

The recent protests indicate dissatisfaction and anger. However, it's unlikely that a new, military-backed regime will be able to do much better. Let alone bring about a dramatic positive change in the economy. Given the political uncertainty, investors and lenders are likely to hold back for some time. If anything, the political change in Bangladesh may have worsened its economic outlook and will create further economic hardship.

The writer is senior fellow, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations

Govt Killing Its Golden Goose?



Ateesh Tankha & Ganga N Rath

In earlier times, when a person couldn't repay a debt, the only options were to beg, borrow or steal. Forgiveness belonged to parables. The sole exception to this rule was when the king was in default: he could reduce his liability by debasing the currency, or by increasing taxes. A pardon was unnecessary—it was the sovereign's money anyway. Nothing in recent times has been as reminiscent of this debunked royal prerogative as the way in which Govt has dealt with its sovereign gold bonds (SGBs).

Looking for a more efficient means to curb the annual demand for gold (about 744 t in FY24) than those linked to raising duties on the precious metal—95% of which is imported—to reduce CAD, which had reached a record \$190 bn in 2013, Arun Jaitley introduced schemes in 2015 to wean people off their favourite investment. These included:

► **Gold monetisation scheme** This promised consumers interest in gold deposits and jewellers' loans against gold holdings.

► **Indian gold coin** This was meant to reduce the acquisition of coins minted abroad.

► **Creation of SGB** An alternative financial asset to physical gold, SGBs carried a fixed rate of interest and redeemable for cash, equivalent to the face value of the gold bond (denominated in grams of gold) at the time of redemption.

Poor uptake ensured that the first two schemes were discontinued. But public subscriptions to the SGB scheme were enthusiastic.

► Between 2015 and early 2024, 67 tranches of SGBs, totalling about 147 t of gold, were issued by Govt, scooping ₹72,275 cr. The first SGB tranche, issued in 2015 for ₹2,684 per gm, matured on November 30, 2023.

► As of March 22, 2024, 5.1 t of gold bonds had been redeemed, of which more than 74% had been allowed to vest over the full eight-year term. This, along with the fact that investors bought ₹27,031 cr worth of the bonds in FY24, was a testament to the fact that ordinary investors viewed SGBs as a safe and flexible investment.

So, why did Govt recently reduce the import duty on physical gold from 15% to 6%, thereby causing gold prices to fall? The only possible explanation is that Govt foresaw a considerable payout and hoped to

quick-fix to enjoy a substantial saving. Some estimate that government savings this year will be in the range of ₹10k cr. The market price of SGBs has fallen by 6-8%, roughly equivalent to the customs duty paid by investors while buying these bonds.

This type of action isn't without precedent. After the advent of the Bretton Woods system, the US aggressively peddled its currency—a government liability—instead of gold, promising to convert dollars at a fixed rate of \$35 per troy ounce of fine gold at any time.

At first, this worked, allowing the US, in the words of Charles de Gaulle, to borrow in dollars, a currency created by its central bank. But a burgeoning BoP deficit occasioned by the costs of the Vietnam and Cold

Wars, extravagant expenditure on various social welfare programmes and soaring inflation eventually led to a massive surge in gold prices and the Nixon shock of 1973: sudden and unexpected end of the Bretton Woods system to save the US economy from collapse.

This begs two other questions: ► Did Govt expect the international price

of gold to remain constant, obviating the need for hedging an open position? ► Is the situation as dire in India today as it was in the US more than 50 years ago? Be that as it may, Govt's plans may not pan out as neatly as it hoped.

► As the price of gold fell following reduction in import duty, consumers rushed to purchase the precious metal, immediately raising prices by 2%. ► Fears that Govt may increase GST on gold, coupled with threat of war in West Asia and an impending interest rate reduction by the Fed, to say nothing of a possible recession, may swell the demand for gold—and, therefore, price per gram—in the future. In which case, Govt will be hoist with its own petard.

The reason why kings were replaced by elected governments was to provide the citizenry a sense of assurance, and to close the trust deficit about national debt, currency stability and taxes. This is why policy pivots like demonetisation and lowering import duty on gold, on the grounds of curtailing black money and gold smuggling, respectively, undermine public faith in a dispensation's ability to operate outside the realm of specious narrative.

Ultimately, if a government bond isn't worth its weight in gold, it's worth nothing.

Tankha is founder-CEO, ALSOWISE Content Solutions, and Rath is former chief general manager, RBI



THE SPEAKING TREE

Mind is a Biocomputer

OSHO

The very mechanism exists to help you to move safely in an unknown world, in a strange world. It is just a safety guard. It does not mean that you should be happy through it—and that is what you have been trying to do. That is how you have created hell around you: you are trying to be happy through the mind, which is not possible.

Those who identify with the mind are the most unhappy people in the world, and this is as it should be. The mind is there to look around as a watchdog, to feel the way. Whenever it is needed, it should be used. Whenever it is not needed, it should be put aside.

But you have become so dependent on the slave that the slave has become the master. And the master has become completely lost. You are not even able to feel where the master is.

Feel more, think less, and you will be more and more happy. The trees are happier than man, the birds are more happy than man, the animals are more happy than man—this is unbelievable! What has happened to man? He has got hooked on to the mechanism of the mind.

It is good that the mind is there. It is beautiful if you can use it. You should use it as one uses a mechanism—just as you drive a car: Don't become identified with the car. Be the driver, remain the driver. And when you don't want to drive, don't allow the car to force you.

Abridged from Tao: The Three Treasures; Courtesy Osho International Foundation; www.osho.com

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

Taking an Early Morning Walk

For a minute, forget about the health benefits of walking. Instead, raise a quiet smile at how wonderful it feels to walk when the world is still getting up, and you have the footpath to yourself. The early morning walk is nature's way of saying hello personally.

There's something magical about stepping out just as the world is waking up. The air is crisp(er), streets are quiet, and the only sounds are the cantata of chirping birds. If there's a breeze, then the rustle of leaves will make the air audible. You're in on a secret the rest of the world



hasn't discovered.

As you stroll along, you notice the sky transitioning from a deep navy to a soft pastel, with the first rays of sunlight breaking out and spreading. The temperature is yet to rise, and you catch the day when it's still cool and young.

Start with this setting and it'll be your personal daily dopamine rush. Along with the feeling that you've accomplished something before the day has even properly begun, it's literally about the morning showing the day.

Chat Room

You Know How This Movie Ends

Apropos the news report, 'Realty LTCG: Taxpayers Get to Choose Regime' (Aug 8), the partial reversal of the budget proposal on long-term capital gains (LTCG) tax on property is but a mirror image of the prevalent old and new personal income-tax regimes. It would be to no one's surprise if indexation-based computation of LTCG soon meets the fate of the old tax regime that is constantly being accorded step-motherly treatment. What else can explain the fact that the middle class' favourite old tax regime is turning highly tax-prone vis-à-vis the new one with each passing budget? So, let us gear up for being blessed with some 'Achhe Din' in the near future.

SK GUPTA
New Delhi



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

TRAGIC REFORMER

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's challenge was creating a private investment-friendly system in a communist-run state. He tried

CAN COMMUNISM COEXIST with a liberalised economy? Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the last Left chief minister of West Bengal, believed it was possible. In his second term in 2006, riding on the CPM-led Left Front's resounding win of 235 out of 294 Assembly seats, Bhattacharjee, who died on August 8 at 80, had hoped to usher his state into a new era of reforms and job creation. The modernisation of government schools in small towns, investments in IT and plans for a SEZ in Nandigram, the Nano plant in Singur and a steel plant in Salboni, were part of that vision. What he had not accounted for was that these new beginnings would be overtaken by endings more momentous: Because of a Politburo that would not back his presence; because of a party so ossified that it refused to recognise the danger from a street fighter who would capitalise on its arrogance and lead a rainbow social coalition to rout it in 2011, winning 227 seats. The Left in West Bengal has never recovered from that blow. In this year's Lok Sabha election, which it fought in alliance with the Congress, despite fielding several young first-timers, it drew a blank.

As West Bengal's CM between 2000 and 2011, Bhattacharjee took over the reins of a predominantly agrarian state in which enterprise was shackled by government controls and diktats of Left-controlled unions. To naysayers who accused him of neglecting farmers, Bhattacharjee would say, "*Krishi amader bhitti, shilpa amader bhobishyat*," (agriculture remains our foundation, but industry is our future). The perestroika he envisaged, however, remained incomplete, and Bhattacharjee has acquired the infamy, perhaps unfairly, of presiding over the decline of CPM in West Bengal. In the second volume of his memoir, *Phire Dekha* (Looking Back), Bhattacharjee asked himself the question that stalks hindsight: Given a chance, what would he have done differently? The answer was Nandigram. He deeply regretted the death of 14 protesters from police firing, that tipping point in the anti-land acquisition movement that propelled Mamata Banerjee to centrestage. But there was also a deeper sadness at being let down by the refusal of others to see that Bengal needed industry.

A death is an occasion for assessment, of measuring a public personality against a broader canvas of history. Bhattacharjee will pass that test as an upright politician stymied by a moribund system, an intellectual who reveled in the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and the plays and poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky; a cineaste whose contributions include one of the finest international film festivals in the country. His predicament was creating a private investment-friendly ecosystem in a communist-run state — an imperative postponed for more than two decades by the Left Front under Jyoti Basu. Bhattacharjee, like Basu, was a *bhadralok*. But unlike his cigar-smoking aristocratic predecessor, he was not weighed down by ideological shibboleths. It both liberated him, and wore him down.

BEFORE A CUT

RBI holds rates steady, maintains stance.

Path of food inflation will influence policy pivot

IN ITS AUGUST meeting, the RBI's monetary policy committee decided to keep interest rates unchanged, and maintain its stance of remaining focused on the withdrawal of accommodation. The committee's decision is along expected lines. Headline retail inflation, as measured by the consumer price index, had risen to 5.08 per cent in June, from 4.8 per cent in May, driven by a surge in food prices. Looking ahead, a possible moderation in prices in the second quarter is not expected to last. The RBI projects inflation for the full year at 4.5 per cent. With growth holding up — the central bank expects the economy to grow at 7.2 per cent this year — it provides the MPC the policy space to focus on inflation. In his comments, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das noted that policy "must continue to be disinflationary" and remain focused on "aligning inflation to the target of 4 per cent on a durable basis."

In June, the food price index had risen to 9.36 per cent, up from 8.69 per cent the month before. Inflation remains high across food categories such as cereals, pulses, and vegetables. There are concerns over the adverse impact of high food inflation on household inflation expectations. Governor Das noted that inflation expectations have edged upwards "on the back of high food inflation" over the past several months. If food inflation remains high and household inflation expectations become unanchored, it could spill over to core inflation. So far, core inflation, which excludes the volatile food and fuel components, has remained subdued. In fact, as Das also noted, core inflation was at a "historic low" of 3.1 per cent in May and June. This has led to the deepening divergence between core and headline inflation.

In most major economies, central banks have either begun to cut interest rates or are on the cusp of doing so. In June, the European Central bank cut interest rates. More recently, the Bank of England has lowered rates. And in its most recent meeting, the US Federal Reserve has also indicated the possibility of cutting rates in its September meeting. In fact, considering that the recent US labour market data came in significantly below expectations, some are now factoring in the possibility of deeper cuts by the Fed. The next MPC meeting is scheduled to be held in October. With the harvesting of the crops, and new *mandi* arrivals, prices could begin to ease. Global food prices, as seen through the FAO food price index, have already eased in July. This could provide the MPC more clarity on the path of food inflation, which would lead to greater certainty on the trajectory of interest rates.

LOST AND FOUND ONLINE

'The Blair Witch Project' is a reminder of how much the internet has shaped people's relationship with fact and fiction

IT FITS SEEMS today that nothing can be trusted — thanks to the manipulations of AI and other tools of misinformation and disinformation — it is instructive to look back at a horror film from 25 years ago. *The Blair Witch Project* (TBWP) may not be the first "found footage" film — that honour would go to 1980's *Cannibal Holocaust* about a filmmaking crew that goes missing in the Amazon rainforest. But its significance goes beyond its undeniable contributions to the horror genre. For, TBWP is an artefact of Web 1.0 that reveals how much the internet has shaped people's relationship with fact and fiction.

Released on July 30, 1999, the film which tells the "true story" of three filmmaking students who go missing in the woods while on the trail of the legendary Blair Witch, confounded viewers because it expertly leveraged their trust in what they read online. The film's directors, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, created a publicity campaign featuring "missing" posters, police reports, investigator interviews and other "evidence" from the "case", all of which could be found on a dedicated website. For viewers, the terror lay in never being a hundred per cent certain that what they were watching on screen was not, in fact, played straight from the camera that had been "recovered" from the woods where the students went missing.

Today, it is unlikely that something like TBWP would fool anyone. One, because the "found footage" trick has become an overused horror trope. Two, because the internet, in its 3.0 user-controlled avatar, has travelled far from those days of innocence. If the words "I read it on the internet" once conveyed a simple faith in information, in the age of deep fakes, they're an indictment of what is lost and found online.



PRIYA RAMANI

We are Vinesh

Why Phogat's joy — and grief — felt personal to many women

WHAT'S THE LESSON to learn from Vinesh Phogat's nightmare? That the patriarchy will always get the last laugh? It's tempting to fall into that trap (I certainly did for a few hours after my favourite wrestler was disqualified), but in recent years, many of us have understood that though that is what the establishment may want you to believe, the reality is quite different — see the way Kamala Harris vs Donald Trump is unfolding in the US.

"I lost...my courage is all broken, I don't have any more strength now," Vinesh said the next day, announcing her retirement. But for us, on and off the mat, Vinesh will always be undefeated. Whether in the Paris Olympics against Yui Susaki, the world's best wrestler in her weight category, a woman unused to failure, or when pitted against former Wrestling Federation of India chief Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, a man with so much political clout that a macho government was afraid to hold him accountable for alleged sexual harassment, Vinesh has always been our winner. Abhinav Bindra tweeted that thanks to Phogat, the nation was unitedly learning what it means to "never lose the fight in us".

While Susaki spent all her time training for Paris, Phogat was in a desperate fight for justice. The patriarchy, represented here by the state and sporting officialdom, drove her and her fellow decorated wrestlers to protest on the streets for 40 days. Her victory — and disqualification — felt deeply personal.

In 2020, I won a prolonged court battle against a former minister in the Narendra Modi government. This week, when Phogat started acing her matches, I felt like I had won again. That her success was vindication for everything this country puts its women through. Phogat and I share the same legal team, led by lawyer Rebecca John, but Phogat's joy and grief is personal for many of us. The language used by women to share how they felt after the news of Phogat's disqualification broke was intimate — "painful", "heartbreaking", "angry", "weepy", "shattering".

Phogat had the collective prayers and "you go, girl!" cheers of Indian women for whom sexual harassment is a daily reality. And their anger. She channelled this rage of women to barrel through to the final. I recognised the

As the coaches and doctors explain why they couldn't save our star athlete from disqualification, let's remind ourselves that Phogat's successes were despite the hurdles her country placed in front of her in the run-up to what is every athlete's most important international tournament. Phogat's Paris story will forever be juxtaposed against the images of policewomen using force to drag her away as she screamed and struggled, the Indian flag lying on the floor.

emotion from nearly 8,000 km away. After her disqualification, our feelings of pride in Phogat and anger against a system that didn't care enough have only increased. More than ever, Vinesh is the hero we need.

Chief medical officer Dinshaw Pardiwala said the team tried "all possible drastic measures" from cutting her hair to shortening the length of her clothes. As the coaches and doctors explain why they couldn't save our star athlete from disqualification, let's remind ourselves that Phogat's successes were despite the hurdles her country placed in front of her in the run-up to what is every athlete's most important international tournament.

Phogat's Paris story will forever be juxtaposed against the images of policewomen using force to drag her away as she screamed and struggled, the Indian flag lying on the floor. As she went from victory to victory, I couldn't help but think that when the PM congratulated her, he should use the opportunity to apologise to Phogat and her colleagues for police misbehaviour and denial of justice. For all the public and private humiliation they have endured and for backing a politically powerful man over the ugly truth of women who are preyed upon in the workplace. Now that's the real lost opportunity. The PM got away with a tweet about "despair" and "resilience".

The same day Phogat won the semi-final against her Cuban opponent, her lawyers were in a Delhi courtroom. John said she had watched the wrestlers from the time they were protesting at Jantar Mantar. "I saw them beaten, bruised, conflicted," she said. "Vinesh kept telling me this is the time I should use for practice. I haven't practised for months." Phogat had told John that she would be unavailable to record evidence until the Olympics was over.

In case you have forgotten the history of the man the Indian state has steadfastly supported, let me re-ignite your memory. The May court order framing charges in the ongoing case of six wrestlers against Singh detailed many instances of alleged abuse by him, including a number of times over a decade, both here and abroad, when he is accused of groping elite wrestlers' breasts on the pretext of checking their breath. I say elite be-

cause imagine those who didn't have the confidence or exposure of these elite athletes and who may not yet have spoken up. Singh's lawyer essentially argued that what happens abroad stays abroad. The court said that didn't hold because these acts were "executed under a 'single criminal enterprise' or 'single impulse' to sexually exploit and harass female wrestlers by abusing his dominant position. There was a clear 'unity of purpose' or 'unity of thought' behind the actions of accused no.1 [Singh] that is, to sexually exploit vulnerable female subordinates as much as possible".

Meanwhile, Team Phogat is more united than ever before. "What Vinesh has done is beyond imagination," Olympic medallist Sakshi Malik, who protested alongside Phogat, said. "If it was possible, I would have given my medal to Vinesh". Juxtaposed against the state's support for Singh were at least three spouses who stood by the women who spoke up and demonstrated first-hand a rarely seen, empathetic model of Indian masculinity. Hopefully, it will spread far and fast.

Whether it's Juno Temple in the latest season of *Fargo* or wrestler Bajrang Punia's admiring description of Phogat, the words "tiger" and "lioness", or their Hindi equivalent "sherni", are used to describe women who battle power and violence to emerge victorious, largely because those around them rub their eyes in disbelief after witnessing the power of their anger. As Soraya Chemaly and others have written, women are taught early in life to suppress our anger. "When a woman shows anger in institutional, political and professional settings, she automatically violates gender norms," Chemaly writes in *Rage Becomes Her*. "She is met with aversion, perceived as hostile, irritable, less competent and unlikeable." Thankfully, female rage has been in vogue for a few years now.

The biggest lesson for me then is that Phogat went to the Olympics as a hero — and will come back a bigger one. Let's rage together with our *sherni*.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based writer and co-founder of India Love Project on Instagram



NILOTPALS BASU

COMMUNIST WHO SAW FUTURE

Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was firm in his conviction that history would absolve him

BUDDHADEB BHATTACHARJEE — Buddhada to us — passed away Thursday morning. He had been suffering for quite some time. His condition had worsened due to prolonged lung-related afflictions. In and out of the hospital, a couple of times his doctors managed to bring him back home. But not this time. He succumbed to a severe cardiac attack.

Buddhada was one of the younger generation of leaders who came into prominence and contributed to the resurgence of the Party and the Left in West Bengal in the turbulent late '60s. Initiated through student activism, he soon became the main face of the youth movement as the first general secretary of the youth organisation in 1968 and built the democratic youth federation across the state. He emerged as a key leader and organiser of the younger generation, instrumental in mobilising the youth against severe assaults on the Party and the Left in resisting the semi-fascist terror of the '70s.

After its emergence in 1977, the Left Front established itself at the helm of affairs in the political landscape of West Bengal. First as MLA and then as a prominent member of Jyoti Basu's government, Buddhada played a key role in consolidating the advances on people's issues. In 2000, when Jyoti Basu stepped down, Bhattacharjee became the chief minister. He led the Party and the Left Front in the assembly elections in 2001 and subsequently in 2006.

While adhering to the principle of unity of the people and resolute struggle against communal and divisive forces, he endeavoured to broaden the appeal of the Left to younger generations. His interest in literature, culture and political change produced an array of publications in literary criticism, original plays, and translation of masterpieces of world literature. He was a crusader against political vengeance and insisted on engagement with his critics.

Buddhada combined a firm commitment to the principles of the struggle for the emancipation of downtrodden sections with an effort to assert a modern and contemporary outlook geared to meet the changing global and national context. He believed deeply that the significant advances etched out by the Left and the progressive movement, based on economic and social justice ushered in by agrarian reforms, had led to stunning advances in deepening justice, improving the conditions of the working people and providing a strong foundation for further progress.

He wanted to give a vigorous push to the industrial policy initiated in 1994 to take a big leap in providing employment by building industry. Despite the decline in public sector investment in industry and agriculture, he believed, along with the collective opinion of the Party and the Left, that transforming the nature of Bengal's economy with greater priorities on modern industry, was essential for the state, which was at a crossroads, to move forward. Critics denigrated him for this stance, but his approach was not at the cost of economic and social justice, which was on firmer ground.

Buddhada's personal life was modest and frugal. He never moved out of his small two-bedroom flat in South Kolkata, even after reaching high office. He did not believe in enjoying anything beyond what was nec-

essary for life. He deeply believed in a democratic style of government. While adhering to the basic principle of unity of the people and resolute struggle against communal and divisive forces, he endeavoured to broaden the appeal of the Left to younger generations. His interest in literature, culture and political change produced an array of publications in literary criticism, original plays, and translation of masterpieces of world literature.

He was a crusader against political vengeance and insisted on political engagement with his critics. His lifestyle and governance were beyond controversy and remain largely unblemished.

After the electoral setback of the Left in 2011, though saddened by the new situation, he was firm in his conviction that contemporary history would absolve him and his beliefs. The present situation in West Bengal and the country highlights the stark contrast between a genuine, insightful people's leader and those who display opulence and grandeur, removed from the people's aspirations. Bhattacharjee's life may have ended, but his legacy will be remembered in the times to come. The young people of West Bengal will always have a fond memory of how he inspired them towards a future of hope and transformation.

The writer is Politburo member of the CPI(M) and former Rajya Sabha MP



AUGUST 9, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PM ON SRI LANKA

PRIME MINISTER INDIRA Gandhi called for restraint in responding to the Sri Lankan situation and said that "whatever we do should help (Sri Lankan Tamils) and not harm them." Any Indian reaction "should save them and not precipitate their annihilation," she said when replying to Rajya Sabha members who sought clarification on a government statement. The statement was made by Minister of State for External Affairs R N Mirdha.

OPPOSITION MERGER

YET ANOTHER BID for the merger of Lok Dal, Janata and the Congress (S) failed with the

presidents of the three parties ending their hour-long meeting without discussing the specific issue of the merger. The 82-year-old Lok Dal president Charan Singh told newsmen after meeting Janata president Chandra Shekhar and the Congress (S) president, Sharad Pawar, "These two gentlemen do not want a merger".

CONCERN OVER RIOTS

MEMBERS FROM BOTH sides in the Lok Sabha expressed grave concern over the increasing incidence of communal riots in the country and urged the government to take prompt and stern action to contain the malaise. Participating in a six-hour special discussion, member after member said it

was shameful that even after 37 years of independence the country was witnessing orgies of communal violence, which was a legacy of the colonial rulers.

A NEW UP PCC(I) CHIEF

THE UNION COMMERCE Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh will take over as president of the Uttar Pradesh PCC (I) as part of the Congress (I)'s determined move to strengthen the organisation in all states before the elections. Singh was in Vienna when the Congress (I) president, Mrs Indira Gandhi, made the appointment. Singh has been told to tender his resignation from the Cabinet by an aide of the Prime Minister.

Doing well on well-being

The poorest have become significantly less vulnerable to medical expenditure-related shocks in the past 10 years. The trend is closely associated with the Ayushman Bharat Yojana



SHAMIKA RAVI

ANALYSIS OF UNIT-LEVEL data from the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES 2022-23) has revealed a dramatic decline in the incidence of poverty since 2011-12. As important as this may be, I wish to go beyond the discussion of poverty and focus on households' vulnerability to adverse shocks, particularly for the bottom 50 per cent of the population. A household's ability to cope with adverse shocks is essential to well-being and is a critical welfare measure. Quantifying this, however, remains a challenge.

We attempt to overcome this challenge by looking at shocks to households in the form of medical expenditure. Even though most households typically incur some form of medical spending in a given year, some households are exposed to larger medical shocks in the form of hospitalisation, where the expenditure incurred is a significantly higher lump-sum amount. While health shocks deprive individuals of their freedom, the associated sizeable medical expenditure also imposes an economic burden on family members as precious resources get diverted from other expenditure items to those needed for providing medical care.

First, I quantify the proportion of Indian households that are subjected to adverse medical shocks associated with hospitalisation. Then, I quantify the vulnerability related to hospitalisation in terms of the proportion of their monthly household expenditure that is devoted to medical expenses if the household has experienced hospitalisation. Finally, I study the change in consumption status of the household by comparing the consumption decile that the household belonged to with medical expenditure included in its household monthly expenditure and compare it to the consumption decile that the household belonged to when we exclude medical spending from the household monthly expenditure. The objective of this is to highlight that households that have incurred high medical spending due to hospitalisation might not have enough resources for other items, such as food or durable goods, and therefore are vulnerable to lowering their consumption status once we construct the consumption decile groups based on household expenditure that excludes medical outlays.

As stated earlier, the emphasis of this analysis is on the bottom 50 per cent population where the proportion of households that incurred hospitalisation expenditure increased from 17 per cent in 2011-12 to 22 per cent in 2022-23. This includes an increase from 18 per cent to 23 per cent for rural households and from 16 per cent to 20 per cent for urban households. This reflects a significant improvement in accessibility to healthcare for the poorest 50 per cent population across rural and urban areas of India.

Next, we study the ratio of health expenditure to the overall household expenditure with and without hospitalisation. The analysis reveals that for the bottom 50 per cent of the households, their health expenditure without any hospitalisation was 3.3 per cent of their monthly household expenditure in 2011-12 which increased marginally to 3.6 per cent in 10 years. However, in sharp contrast, households that experienced hospitalisation have witnessed a significant decline in the share of their health expenditure as a ratio of their monthly household expenditure from 10.8 per cent to 9.4 per cent in 10 years.

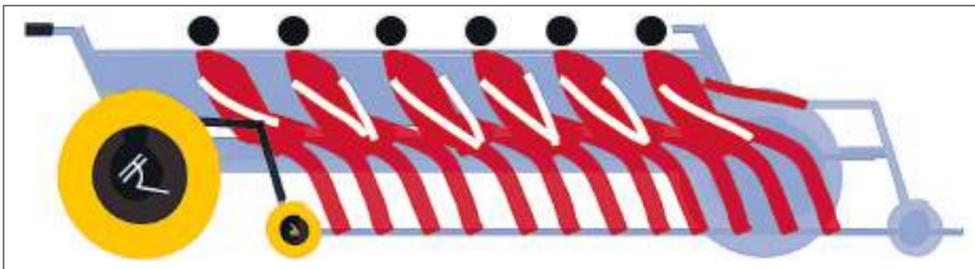


TABLE 1 Proportion of bottom 50 per cent households that incurred hospitalisation in past year

	NSS (2011-12)	HCES (2022-23)
Rural	17.50%	23.00%
Urban	16.10%	20.10%
Overall	16.80%	21.60%

Note: These results are based on the analysis of the unit-level data. We used a multi-level model that accounted for the states where the household belonged, whether it was residing in rural or urban areas, the consumption decile household belonged to, and whether the household had children (aged between 0 and 3) or elderly (age = 60 years).

TABLE 2 Health expenditure as a proportion of household monthly expenditure for the bottom 50 per cent

	Households without hospitalisation expense		Households with hospitalisation expense	
	NSS (2011-12)	HCES (2022-23)	NSS (2011-12)	HCES (2022-23)
Overall	3.34%	3.58%	10.80%	9.41%
Rural	3.44%	3.59%	11.15%	9.14%
Urban	3.18%	3.57%	10.28%	9.85%

TABLE 3 Probability of lowering the consumption status of household for bottom 50 per cent due to hospitalisation in past year

	NSS (2011-12)		HCES (2022-23)		
	Probability	Odds*	Probability	Odds*	Odds Ratio\$
Overall	40%	0.66	34%	0.51	0.77
Rural	44%	0.79	36%	0.56	0.71
Urban	35%	0.54	32%	0.47	0.87

Note: These results are based on the analysis of the unit-level data. We used a multi-level model that accounted for the states where the household belonged, whether it was residing in rural or urban areas, the consumption decile household belonged to, whether the household incurred hospitalization expenses in the past 365 days, and whether the household had children (aged between 0 and 3) or elderly (age = 60 years). *Odds is defined as probability/(1-probability). \$Odds Ratio is the ratio of Odds in 2022-23 to Odds in 2011-12.

Illustration: C R Sasikumar

A noticeable difference is also observed between rural and urban areas. In rural areas, for the bottom 50 per cent, the ratio of health expenditure of households without hospitalisation increased marginally from 3.4 per cent to 3.6 per cent over 11 years. Still, during the same period for households that experienced hospitalisation, this ratio declined significantly from 11.15 per cent to 9.14 per cent. We found a similar result for urban areas but less pronounced. For households that did not experience hospitalisation, it increased marginally from 3.2 per cent to 3.6 per cent, but during the same period, for households that experienced hospitalisation, it declined from 10.3 per cent to 9.9 per cent. These results highlight that healthcare that involves significant hospitalisation expenditure is becoming more affordable for the poorest half of the Indian population, especially in rural areas.

Now, we explore the vulnerability or change in the consumption status of households due to health expenditure, particularly for those that incurred the hospitalisation burden. The results reveal that among the poorest half of the population, 40 per cent of those who experienced hospitalisation faced a decline in their consumption status in 2011-12. However, by 2022-23, despite the rising incidence of hospitalisation, only 33 per cent of these households faced a decrease in their consumption status.

We explore the vulnerability or change in the consumption status of households due to health expenditure, particularly for those that incurred hospitalisation burden. The results reveal that among the poorest half of the population, 40 per cent of those who experienced hospitalisation faced a decline in their consumption status in 2011-12. However, by 2022-23, despite the rising incidence of hospitalisation, only 33 per cent of these households faced a decrease in their consumption status.

hospitalisation, only 33 per cent of these households faced a decrease in their consumption status.

In terms of conventional odds ratios, these results imply a 23 per cent reduction in the odds of households facing a decline in consumption status due to hospitalisation. This effect was more pronounced in rural areas where 44 per cent of the bottom 50 per cent of households that incurred hospitalisation faced a decline in their consumption status in 2011-12. This reduced significantly to 36 per cent by 2022-23, implying a reduction of 29 per cent in the odds of poor rural households experiencing a decline in overall consumption status due to hospitalisation. For poor urban households, the odds fell by 14 per cent over the 11 years.

So overall in the last decade, healthcare has become more accessible and affordable to the bottom 50 per cent of the Indian population. We also find that there is a significant decline in the odds of households facing a loss in overall consumption status due to the financial burden associated with hospitalisation — which is a strong measure of vulnerability. These results are more pronounced for rural households and particularly for households that have young children and elderly members within the family. These noteworthy trends are closely associated with public health policies in India, particularly Ayushman Bharat Yojana, which targets the financial burden of hospitalisation for the poor.

The writer is member, Economic Advisory Council to the PM

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Bangladesh was unique among 30 countries polled for the Open Society Barometer last year, with more respondents prioritising civil and political rights than economic and social rights. Its people want a real say at last. They should get it." — THE GUARDIAN

Reading the inflation tea leaves

MPC cannot ignore food prices. But their unpredictability makes RBI's future policy uncertain



RAJANI SINHA

THE RBI'S MONETARY Policy Committee left the policy rate and stance unchanged in its August meeting. This was on expected lines and the RBI governor highlighted in his speech that there is good convergence between market expectations and MPC policy. However, what is lacking is convergence in the market view on the MPC's future course of action. The RBI has highlighted concerns around high food inflation, while core inflation (excluding food and fuel) remains muted. Food inflation is influenced by climatic factors and is beyond the control of the central bank. However, it cannot ignore food inflation as it has a strong bearing on household inflationary expectations, which in turn can feed into actual inflation. This is what makes RBI's future policy uncertain and complex.

CPI inflation has been hovering around 5 per cent for the last six months, higher than RBI's target of 4 per cent. This is mainly because of spikes in prices of food items, which has a high weight of 46 per cent in the CPI basket. High inflation in cereals (8.8 per cent), pulses (16 per cent) and vegetables (29 per cent) have been keeping food inflation elevated at around 8 per cent. The RBI is concerned about the strong bearing of food inflation on household inflationary expectations, which is currently at a high of 8 per cent (as per the RBI Household Survey). So far, the high food inflation has not become broad-based and core inflation has been below RBI's target of 4 per cent for the last six months.

Interestingly, the latest Economic Survey suggested that the MPC should consider targeting CPI inflation excluding food prices. The share of food and beverage in India's CPI basket is much higher than developed countries (15 per cent in the US and 20 per cent in the EU) or even emerging economies like Brazil, China and South Africa (weight ranges between 20-25 per cent). It is relatively easier for developed countries to have an inflation-targeting monetary policy given the low share of food in the inflation basket, but it is challenging for India. This is because food prices are volatile and influenced by weather conditions, making it challenging to have monetary policy targeted around CPI inflation (including food). Monetary policy generally affects demand-side factors and is somewhat ineffective in controlling supply-driven food inflation.

At the current juncture, RBI needs to take a holistic approach to CPI inflation targeting. While the focus on supply-induced and demand-side inflation should continue, it is critical to assess the likely nature of supply-induced inflation. For instance, it is important to critically assess components of food inflation like vegetable prices that could be transitory. CPI inflation excluding vegetable prices is currently around 3.7 per cent and it has been

below RBI's 4 per cent target for the last five months.

If the monsoon's progress is satisfactory, we can expect some moderation in food inflation in the months to come. However, achieving RBI's target of 4 per cent on a durable basis will still be a challenge. RBI has retained its average inflation projection at 4.5 per cent for FY25, with quarterly inflation projection remaining above 4 per cent till Q1 FY25. Our CPI projection for FY25 is marginally higher at 4.8 per cent.

The RBI has retained its GDP growth projection at 7.2 per cent in FY25. High-frequency indicators like IIP, auto sales, GST collection, PMI-Manufacturing and Services continue to remain healthy. However, concern remains around consumption demand and relatively muted recovery in private investment. Rural demand is showing signs of improvement as reflected by the FMCG sales. A healthy monsoon and the consequent moderation in food inflation should somewhat aid consumption recovery. With a rise in capacity utilisation, private investment is likely to pick up, though at a moderate pace. We expect the GDP to grow at 7 per cent in FY25.

As far as the global economy is concerned there is increased geo-political turmoil even while growth concerns linger. There is monetary policy divergence, with central banks in the EU, Canada, Sweden, Brazil and China initiating a cutting cycle even while their counterparts in Japan and Indonesia have hiked policy interest rates. The US Federal Reserve is expected to start cutting rates from September. The Indian economy is relatively well poised on the external sector front, with expectations of a comfortable current account deficit and healthy capital inflows in FY25. High forex reserves of \$675 billion are a big source of comfort — nevertheless, we need to remain cautious amid the global turmoil.

The RBI has highlighted the issue of bank deposit growth trailing credit growth and the liquidity risk that it poses for the sector. With bank credit growing at 14 per cent (excluding merger impact) and muted deposit growth of 11 per cent, the credit deposit ratio has risen to 77.4 in July. This is due to the diversion of household savings into other asset classes like equity, which have been offering higher returns. Another important issue that the central bank has highlighted is a sharp growth in some parts of the personal loans segment. Bank retail loan growth moderated after the RBI tightened regulatory norms, but it is still growing at a high pace — around 19 per cent. While there is a need to exercise caution around these risks, some of these are due to structural changes in the consumption and investment pattern of households, aided by digitisation in the economy.

Going forward, the RBI will continue to watch trends in inflation. The direction of food inflation would have a strong bearing on RBI's future policy decisions. It is critical for the RBI to assess what part of food inflation could be transitory. With domestic core inflation remaining muted, RBI could go for a shallow rate cut towards the end of the calendar year, provided food inflation shows signs of moderation.

The writer is chief economist, CareEdge Ratings



SANDHYA GOKHALE

Dear Lakshya

A player should persevere without thinking of outcomes

LAKSHYA SEN, I'M beaming with pride and sending you a big hug. I was thrilled to watch your first match against the Guatemalan opponent from the stadium, cheering you on with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. The first game showcased your mastery, but the second filled me with an unfamiliar sense of maternal anxiety. I found myself shouting, "Steady, Lakshya!" as you were struggling for a while. Your victory brought me immense relief, and I celebrated with my family like a child.

I must confess, I am a huge fan of your lightning-quick agility and unwavering perseverance on the court. Your dedication is inspiring. I have watched all your past matches, and on July 27, I realised, in hindsight, I was invested in those with a mother's fervour. That's why your last two matches in Paris left me heartbroken. When you won the quarter-finals and still didn't rejoice in front of your opponent, Chou Tien-chen, who is fighting colorectal cancer, it was truly commendable. You are the first Indian male shuttler to enter the semifinals in the men's singles category. You had a seven-point lead in the second

game against Viktor Axelsen. I wept as you fought to recover, throwing yourself into each point with your signature energy, but something was amiss. When you injured your hand again, I wanted to rush to your side and say, "Enough, beta! You're just 22, with your golden years ahead." But you fought like a warrior.

It's not about getting knocked down; it's about getting back up.

To me, you were the winner.

My daughter Samiha, a former football player, has sports woven into her being. I used to dismiss her tears after India's defeats, saying, "It's just a game". But now I see that her sorrow wasn't just about winning or losing — it was about the love she poured into the game. Today, I would have cried alongside you, holding you tight in a warm embrace.

I am still processing the depth of my sorrow when I heard my hero Prakash Padukone say what he said. I whispered tears in his ears, "...this is not the time for these words." Losing the heartstopping hockey match against Germany was just as painful as losing a gold medal by 5mm or

eligibility by 100gm. How do we explain the shocking elimination of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty from the quarter finals? Is it fair to assess their worth from these defeats? And despite Vinesh Phogat's victorious entry into finals, how do we, as a nation and a system, come to terms with our collective failure in supporting her while she was trying to right a wrong? Today, the resilient fighter is disqualified and we are all devastated. In the face of this adversity, camaraderie shown by our star from Hyderabad shines like a ray of light. "Knowing you and your willpower, it's only a matter of time, buddy! Just know I will always be your biggest supporter." Just read these last lines of message by P V Sindhu in support of her biggest on-court rival, Carolina Marin, who landed awkwardly on her surgically repaired knee during the women's singles semi-finals. I'm proud of you too, Sindhu, for your unshakable determination. It was not easy to deal with your exit in 56 minutes in the pre-quarter final match. Together, all of you personify the collective grief of those who suffered losses and those

who mourned your defeat, yet remained unbroken in spirit.

Lakshya, I'll be in the stadium four years from now, rejoicing when you receive your gold medal, as Axelsen hinted in his speech.

In the meanwhile, each night, I will tell you a bedtime story. The first one is a tale of a Zen master whose martial arts student approached him and said, "Master, I've lost again in the tournament. I'm so disappointed."

The master replied, "Did you win or lose?"

The student said, "I lost."

The master asked, "Did you win or lose when you began training?"

The student thought and said, "I didn't win or lose, I just started."

The master smiled and said, "Exactly. You started. And now, you continue. Winning and losing are just illusions. The true victory is in the journey, not the destination."

Lakshya, Sindhu, Vinesh... keep going, we will follow you wherever you take us.

Gokhale is a lawyer, writer and director

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SHE IS THE GOLD

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Brighter than gold' (IE, August 8). Vinesh Phogat has displayed unparalleled resilience and excellent calibre by reaching the Olympics finals. She has defeated previously undefeated athletes. Despite her and her team's best effort, she came up short on the weight test right before the final bout. In sports, such events are a source of great inspiration. Vinesh has made a review appeal in the Court of Arbitration for Sports for consideration of a silver medal. She may not have bagged gold but her performance has been much more than golden. So has been her performance in leaving an imprint on the minds of many young aspiring sportswomen. Thank you for your service, Vinesh.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Brighter than gold' (IE, August 8). The disqualification of wrestler Vinesh Phogat from the gold medal match in her category at the Paris Olympics because of a 100-grams excess in her body weight has saddened the whole nation. Despite her desperate nightlong workouts with the assistance of healthcare specialists, she could not succeed in shedding the additional weight she had accumulated while winning all three crucial bouts before qualifying

for the coveted play-off. She is now deprived of even the silver medal she would have received had she lost in the final. In her efforts, she has won our hearts, medal or not. This was a horrible twist of destiny for her and an irreparable loss to the nation, indeed.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

FIX RESPONSIBILITY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Lesson from Wayanad' (IE, August 8). The Wayanad landslide claimed over 300 lives and many are still missing. This tragedy was predictable given the total disregard of guidelines of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) in the management of the ecology of Wayanad. Prohibited activities like mining and quarrying in the protected zones and rampant construction in the mountain slopes have denuded the forest green cover leading to soil erosion, which triggers landslides. The question of fixing responsibility for the deaths and destruction must not be obfuscated by presenting it as a natural disaster. As per UN classifications, this is a hybrid disaster, the combined result of man-made and natural forces. The regulatory bodies responsible for making the region fraught for disaster and every other stakeholder must be held to account.

L R Murlu, New Delhi

Govt's proposed curbs on independent online content creators

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK & APURVA VISHWANATH
 NEW DELHI, AUGUST 8

THE MINISTRY of Information and Broadcasting is learnt to have proposed expanded regulations for independent creators of news content on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and X, which has raised concerns over the freedom of speech and expression.

A draft Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill, 2024, circulated among a handful of stakeholders a few weeks ago seeks to expand the remit of the ministry from over-the-top (OTT) content and digital news to social media accounts and online video creators.

This is an updated version of the draft released publicly in November last year. The revised draft defines a "digital news broadcaster" in sweeping terms, requires them to have prior registration with the government, and prescribes standards for content evaluation.

Curbs on news creators

The 2023 draft defined news and current

affairs programmes as: "(i) newly-received or noteworthy audio, visual or audio-visual programmes or live programmes, including analysis, about recent events primarily of socio-political, economic or cultural nature, or (ii) any programmes transmitted or retransmitted on broadcasting network, where the context, purpose, import and meaning of such programmes implies so".

In the 2024 draft, a new category of "digital news broadcaster" or "publisher of news and current affairs content" has been introduced, defined as "any person who broadcasts news and current affairs programme through an online paper, news portal, website, social media intermediary, or other similar medium as part of a systematic business, professional, or commercial activity but excluding replica e-papers".

"Systematic" activity has been defined as any structured or organised activity that involves an element of planning, method, continuity or persistence — terms with broad meanings that could give the executive sweeping powers of interpretation.

The 2024 draft specifically includes indi-

vidual creators in the definition of digital news broadcasters; the definition in the Information Technology Rules, 2021 specifically excludes individual users. Part III of the 2021 IT Rules regulates digital news publishers and OTT platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video.

The Bombay and Madras High Courts have stayed Rules 9(1) and 9(3) of the IT Rules 2021 that say news and current affairs publishers must adhere to the Code of Ethics, citing their adverse impact on press freedom. These HC orders may serve as a precedent if digital news broadcasters seek a stay on provisions in the Broadcasting Bill, if it were to be brought in its current form.

Obligations of creators

The revised draft says that a creator who is categorised as a digital news broadcaster must "intimate" the ministry of their work and existence; they must form one or more content evaluation committees at their own expense; and "strive to make" the committee diverse.

The names of the people on these committees must be shared with the government.

News creators who do not intimate the government of the details of committee members are liable to be fined Rs 50 lakh for the first contravention, and Rs 2.5 crore for subsequent violations in the next three years. But some exemptions are indicated — the government can "exempt a distinct class of players or a group for avoiding genuine hardship", the draft says.

The 2023 version had said the government may prescribe a subscriber/viewer threshold that triggers intimation and content code obligations. The new draft Bill does not have this provision.

Rationale for regulation

A senior government official said a key reason for the significant changes proposed in the 2023 draft was the "role that a number of independent content creators played in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls".

"In a number of instances, creators made videos on current affairs that made some

sensational claims about the government and its senior leaders. That is when it was decided that there has to be accountability for these creators, to create a level playing field between mainstream press and independent creators," the official said.

On June 4, the day the election results were announced, the ministry sent a notice to stakeholders regarding a meeting on the draft Bill. At least six meetings have taken place with the ministry since then, industry executives said.

As per the current wording of the Bill, even foreign creators may fall under its ambit, even though it could be challenging to enforce Indian content regulations on them.

Obligations on social media

According to the draft, online intermediaries such as Facebook, YouTube, and X are exempt from liability for third-party content, if the intermediary:

- limits its function to providing access to a communication system over which information made available by third parties is transmitted or temporarily stored or hosted;
- does not initiate the transmission;
- does not select or modify the information, except in compliance with government order;
- observes due diligence while discharging duties under the Act and observes other prescribed guidelines.

The draft Bill also has criminal liability provisions for social media companies if they do not provide information "pertaining to OTT Broadcasters and Digital News Broadcasters" on their platforms for compliance.

Law in other countries

In Singapore, both traditional broadcasters and OTT content providers come under the country's broadcasting law. Under the copyright law, OTT platforms are regulated, and they require a licence from a regulator, although licensees do not have the same level of obligations as other television services.

In the US, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and its Media Bureau regulate broadcast radio and television stations. OTT platforms are not directly regulated by US federal law or government authorities.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

BEFORE YUNUS, NOBEL LAUREATES WHO LATER LED THEIR COUNTRY

Muhammad Yunus, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, took oath as the chief adviser of Bangladesh's interim government on Thursday. Not counting Yunus, 30 Nobel laureates have served as their country's head of state/government — 17 (like former US President Barack Obama) won the prize while in office, while eight (like former US President Jimmy Carter) were awarded after leaving office.

Five Nobel laureates won the prize before assuming office. Here is a list.



LESTER PEARSON, CANADA
 Pearson was the Canadian prime minister from 1963 to 1968, and a leader of the Liberal Party.

Despite leading a minority govt, he introduced a national pension plan, broadened old-age security benefits, and laid the groundwork for universal healthcare in Canada. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957, for his role in resolving the Suez Crisis.



LECH WALESA, POLAND
 Walesa served as Poland's president from 1990-95. A shipyard electrician, Walesa founded and

led the Solidarity trade union. Despite being banned, the union's activities were pivotal in bringing an end to communist rule in Poland in 1989. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 "for non-violent struggle for free trade unions and human rights in Poland".



AUNG SAN SUU KYI, MYANMAR
 Suu Kyi served as the de-facto head of the Myanmar govt from 2016 to 2021. She rose

to prominence as an anti-junta, pro-democracy icon in Myanmar in the late 1980s, and endured lengthy prison stays till 2010. Her 1991 Nobel Peace Prize was "for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights". In recent years, she has been criticised for her tacit support for the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people.



NELSON MANDELA, SOUTH AFRICA
 Mandela served as the first Black president of South Africa from 1994 to

1999. In 1962, the anti-apartheid activist was sentenced to life in prison for conspiring to overthrow the govt. He spent the next 27 years in prison. After being released in 1990, he negotiated a peaceful end to apartheid over the next four years, for which he shared the Nobel Peace Prize with then President Frederik Willem de Klerk.



JOSÉ RAMOS-HORTA, EAST TIMOR
 Ramos-Horta has been the president of East Timor since 2022. He previously held the position from 2007 to 2012. He shared the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize with Carlos Belo, for working "towards a just and peaceful solution to the conflict in East Timor", which facilitated the end of Indonesia's occupation of the former Portuguese colony. East Timor became a sovereign state in 2002.

ARJUN SENGUPTA

EXPLAINED LAW

Proposed changes to Waqf law

A Bill seeking to amend the 1995 Waqf Act, and proposing sweeping changes to how Waqfs are governed and regulated, has been referred to a Joint Committee of Parliament following protests by opposition MPs

ASAD RAHMAN
 NEW DELHI, AUGUST 8

THE GOVERNMENT on Thursday referred the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, to a Joint Committee of Parliament. The tabling of the Bill by Union Minister of Minority Affairs Kiren Rijju was met with strong criticism from the Opposition parties who said the proposed law was "unconstitutional", "anti-minority", and "divisive".

The Bill seeks to amend the 1995 Waqf Act, and proposes sweeping changes to how Waqfs are governed and regulated. What is the law on Waqf? What amendments has the Bill proposed, and why are these changes significant?

First, what is a Waqf property?

A Waqf is personal property given by Muslims for a specific purpose — religious, charitable, or for private purposes. While the beneficiaries of the property can be different, the ownership of the property is implied to be with God.

A Waqf can be formed through a deed or instrument or orally, or a property can be deemed to be Waqf if it has been used for religious or charitable purposes for a long period of time. Once a property is declared as Waqf, its character changes forever, and cannot be reversed.

How is a Waqf governed?

Waqf properties in India are governed by the Waqf Act, 1995. However, India has had a legal regime for the governance of Waqfs since 1913, when the Muslim Waqf Validating Act came into force. The Mussalman Wakf Act, 1923 followed. After Independence, the Central Waqf Act, 1954, was enacted, which was ultimately replaced by the Waqf Act, 1995.

In 2013, the law was amended to prescribe imprisonment of up to two years for encroachment on Waqf property, and to explicitly prohibit the sale, gift, exchange, mortgage, or transfer of Waqf property.

The Waqf law provides for the appointment of a survey commissioner who maintains a list of all Waqf properties by making local investigations, summoning witnesses, and requisitioning public documents.

A Waqf property is managed by a *mutawalli* (caretaker), who acts as a supervisor. Waqf properties are managed in a way that is similar to how properties under Trusts are managed under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. The Waqf Act states that any dispute re-



Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav speaks in Parliament on Thursday. PTI

lated to Waqf properties will be decided by a Waqf Tribunal. The Tribunal is constituted by the state government, and comprises three members — a chairperson who is a state judicial officer not below the rank of a District, Sessions or Civil Judge, Class I; an officer from the state civil services; and a person with knowledge of Muslim law and jurisprudence.

The law also has provisions for the constitution and appointment of Waqf Boards, Waqf Councils, Chief Executive Officers for Waqf Boards in the states. The CEOs and parliamentarians who are part of the Waqf Boards must be from the Muslim community.

What are the functions of the Waqf Boards?

A Waqf Board is a body under the state government, which works as a custodian for Waqf properties across the state. In most states, there are separate Waqf Boards for the Shia and Sunni communities. Almost all prominent mosques in the country are Waqf properties and are under the Waqf Board of the state.

A Waqf Board is headed by a chairperson, and has one or two nominees from the state government, Muslim legislators and parliamentarians, Muslim members of the state Bar Council, recognised scholars of Islamic theology, and *mutawallis* of Waqfs with an

annual income of Rs 1 lakh and above.

A Waqf Board has powers under the law to administer the property and take measures for the recovery of lost properties of any Waqf, and to sanction any transfer of immovable property of a Waqf by way of sale, gift, mortgage, exchange, or lease. However, the sanction shall not be given unless at least two thirds of the members of the Waqf Board vote in favour of such a transaction.

What major changes have been proposed to the Waqf Act?

The Bill seeks to substantially alter the existing framework of Waqf law. The proposed amendment shifts the power of governing Waqfs from the Boards and Tribunals, which are largely run by the Muslim community, to the state governments.

Among the key changes in the Bill:

- The Bill seeks to change the name of the parent Act from the Waqf Act, 1995, to the Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development Act, 1995.
- It seeks to introduce three new provisions in the Act:

First, Section 3A, which states that no person shall create a Waqf unless he is the lawful owner of the property and competent to

transfer or dedicate such property. This provision appears to address the assumption that land that does not belong to an individual is not given as Waqf.

Second, Section 3C(1), which states that "government property identified or declared as Waqf property, before or after the commencement of this Act, shall not be deemed to be a Waqf property".

Third, Section 3C(2), which empowers the government to decide if a property given as Waqf is government land. "If any question arises as to whether any such property is a Government property, the same shall be referred to the Collector having jurisdiction who shall make such inquiry as he deems fit, and determine whether such property is a Government property or not and submit his report to the State Government," says the Bill.

This provision essentially means that the Collector — and not the Waqf Tribunal — will make this determination in case of a dispute.

The proposed clause also states that such property "shall not be treated as Waqf property till the Collector submits his report". This means that until the government decides the issue, Waqf cannot be in control of the disputed land.

The proposed Bill would also give the central government the power to "direct the audit of any Waqf at any time by an auditor appointed by the Comptroller and Auditor-General of India, or by any officer designated by the Central Government for that purpose".

These provisions, when read together, indicate that the Bill carries a presumption that government land is incorrectly deemed Waqf property in some cases, and that the issue needs intervention by the government.

■ The Bill also redefines how a property is deemed to be in the possession of Waqf, as it seeks to remove the concept of "Waqf by use". Under the 1995 law, a property by continuous and uninterrupted use by Muslims for religious purposes is "deemed" to be a Waqf property. This means that a property can be deemed to be a Waqf through use even if the original declaration is suspect. Several mosques and graveyards could fall in this category.

The proposed Bill, by omitting the provisions relating to "Waqf by user," makes a Waqf property suspect in the absence of a valid Waqfnama.

■ The Bill proposes to change the composition of Waqf Boards in states. It proposes to allow even a non-Muslim CEO, and gives the power to the state government to have at least two non-Muslim members to the state Waqf Boards.

What's causing Antarctica's deep-winter heatwave, what could be its fallout?

ALIND CHAUHAN
 NEW DELHI, AUGUST 8

FOR THE second time in two years, a record-breaking heatwave is sweeping through Antarctica at the height of its winter season. Ground temperatures have been 10 degrees Celsius higher than normal on average since mid-July, and up to 28 degrees higher on certain days.

In parts of East Antarctica, the relatively higher-elevation swathe that makes up two-thirds of the world's coldest continent, temperatures are currently in the range of minus 25 degrees to minus 30 degrees Celsius. Deep-winter temperatures here usually vary between minus 50 degrees and minus 60 degrees Celsius.

While even these elevated temperatures would be difficult to imagine for most people, they are alarmingly high for the perma-

nently frozen continent at the bottom of the world. What is happening in Antarctica?

Reasons for heatwave

Scientists believe that the higher temperatures are mainly a consequence of the weakening of the polar vortex, the band of cold air and low pressure systems that spins around the poles of the Earth in the stratosphere.

The vortex usually remains strong and stable during winter in the southern hemisphere — keeping cold air trapped over Antarctica and not letting hot air come in — but it has been disturbed this year by large-scale atmospheric waves (periodic disturbances in the fields of atmospheric variables).

Due to this, the vortex released trapped cold air, and opened the door for warmer air to enter the region. As this warmer air travelled downwards from the upper atmosphere, it caused an increase in temperatures.

A weakened southern hemisphere vor-

tex is a rare event that is only expected to occur once every two decades on average, Thomas Bracegirdle, the deputy science leader of the British Antarctic Survey's Atmosphere, Ice and Climate team, told CNN in an interview. "This is a very unusual event, from that perspective," Bracegirdle said.

Several other factors — including the reduction of the extent of the Antarctic sea ice — could also be at play.

In June, the extent of Antarctic sea ice was the second-lowest ever for that time of year — a little more than the extent recorded in June 2023, the lowest ever. Sea ice plays a crucial role in keeping temperatures down in the polar regions, as its bright, white surface reflects more sunlight (solar energy) back to space than liquid water.

Sea ice also ensures that the air remains cool by acting as a barrier between the cold

air and the relatively warmer water below.

Edward Blanchard, an atmospheric scientist at the University of Washington, told *The Washington Post*: "It is likely that having less sea ice and a warmer Southern Ocean around the Antarctic continent loads the dice for warmer winter weather over Antarctica... From this perspective, it might be a bit less surprising to see large heat waves in Antarctica this year".

Global warming has hit Antarctica harder than elsewhere on the planet. According to a 2023 study published in

the journal *Nature Climate Change*, the continent is likely warming at a rate of 0.22 degrees Celsius to 0.32 degrees Celsius per decade — almost twice as fast as the rest of the world. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations body that advances scientific knowledge about climate change, has estimated that the

Earth as a whole is warming at the rate of 0.14-0.18 degrees Celsius per decade.

The possible fallout

Antarctica's hot winter will likely lead to further losses of the Antarctic Ice Sheet (the world's other major ice sheet is the Greenland Ice Sheet) that can potentially raise global sea levels by hundreds of feet. Antarctica has already lost 280% more ice mass in the 2000s and 2010s than it lost in the 1980s and 1990s, according to a 2019 study published in the journal *PNAS*.

In March 2022, when the continent witnessed its largest heatwave, and temperatures in East Antarctica soared to 39 degrees Celsius above normal, a portion of the ice sheet the size of Rome collapsed.

The Antarctic Ice Sheet, a glacier covering 98% of the Antarctic continent, holds more than 60% of the world's total freshwater. If entirely melted, it can submerge coastal cities

and reshape the world's map. A sea level rise of only a few feet will displace the roughly 230 million people who live within about 3 feet of the high tide line today, according to a report by the environmental organisation Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition.

Rising temperatures will also impact the global ocean circulation system, which regulates climate by storing and transporting heat, carbon, nutrients, and freshwater around the world. A 2023 study published in the journal *Nature* showed that the melting ice in Antarctica is slowing down this circulation. The freshwater from melting ice reduces the salinity and density of the surface water and diminishes the downward flow to the ocean's bottom, the analysis said.

A slower global ocean circulation system will lead to oceans absorbing less heat and CO2, intensify global warming, and increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events like floods and droughts.

EXPLAINED CLIMATE



the hindu **businessline.**

FRIDAY - AUGUST 9, 2024

Missed opportunity

MPC could have changed stance to neutral

At its 50th meeting, the Monetary Policy Committee could perhaps have reviewed its liquidity stance of 'withdrawal of accommodation' — one that it has maintained for well over a year. A chance to support growth may well have been missed here. The central bank's projection of 7.2 per cent growth for FY25 does appear on the optimistic side given the vagaries of the ongoing monsoon, the corporate earnings slowdown in Q1 and unfolding global events.



A change in stance now would have made it possible for a rate cut later this calendar year, if the growth impulse turned weak. This reasoning seems to have prompted two of the six MPC members to take a contrary, dovish stance at the June meeting and this one. Private investment needs a fillip more than ever. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) remains focused on retail inflation, citing "price stability" as the bedrock for growth. For an inflation-targeting central bank that has fixed for itself a 4 per cent target, the current levels are elevated. But the rise now is driven by food and is not generalised (7.5 per cent in FY24 and 9.4 per cent in June, with the headline rate at 5.4 per cent and 5.1 per cent, respectively). The RBI fears that food prices may elevate inflationary expectations. It has significantly termed food inflation as "persistent" and not "transitory". This is something of a puzzle, given that the RBI has, in fact, taken a sanguine view on monsoon driving growth prospects, with signs of an uptick in kharif sowing and the impact of La Nina oceanic currents later this year presumably lifting rabi output.

If food inflation remains 'persistent' despite this situation, it calls for more research into why this is so, and whether it is a subject for the RBI or the government to handle. In sum, the RBI's inflation reading is a bit fuzzy. It is also odd for the monetary authorities to take a sanguine view on growth on the basis of the monsoon at present being at 107 per cent of long-period average when there have been regional variations. An underwhelming kharif like last year could impact growth overall. A vigil on inflation would perhaps not have been compromised by relaxing the liquidity stance to neutral to lift sentiments. The prospect of global rates being eased allows the RBI to relax its stance without outflow worries.

Besides being convinced that growth does not need a rate stimulus, it is also possible that RBI wants to shore up deposit rates at a time when credit growth has been outpacing deposit growth. It has been a matter of some concern that banks have been tardy in transmitting the 250 bps increase between May 2022 and February 2023. However, banks seem to be running up against structural limits to attracting deposits at a time when gold, property, mutual funds and equities are proving to be attractive. These factors give rise to larger questions of intermediation of savings and investments. Technological and structural shifts have given rise to a fresh set of policy challenges.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"I figured the stock market is not for us bears!"



MADAN SABNAVIS

The credit policy announced is significant for two reasons, even though nothing has changed on the rates front. The language used and the explanation given highlight important facets of the policy rationale. First is that the economy is doing well and on the path of stable high growth, which will be 7.2 per cent. There is no change in the number which means that the RBI is more optimistic than the government, which had projected growth at 6.5-7 per cent for the year.

But the more far reaching implication is that it clearly indicates that the present interest rate stance cannot militate against growth. This is important because there is one school of thought, which was also voiced by some members of the MPC in the past, which believes that not lowering the repo rate will hurt growth. Therefore, this clarification was required and should assuage the markets.

The second significant point made was on inflation. There is again a school of thought which argues that interest rates cannot affect food inflation. As a corollary it is argued that when core inflation is low the repo rate can be cut even if food inflation is high. Here the RBI has provided three compelling arguments. The first is that the mandate is to target headline inflation and not core inflation. This is extremely important because core inflation is only a sub-component of the index and it would not be proper to keep dicing the index and taking views on how monetary policy can have an impact on these components. If headline inflation is the only target, there can be no deviation from the mandate.

Second, the statement has pointed out that as food has the highest weight in the index and is also what affects consumers, the related inflation number cannot be ignored. In fact, allowing it to be persistently high will create inflationary expectations that will in turn push up headline inflation in future. Last, the RBI has also explained that if left unchecked, food inflation will enter core inflation components too and hence push up headline inflation. Therefore pre-emptive action is required to ensure that this passes through does not take place.

Hence these two points made are significant and lays down the rationale for maintaining status quo on both the repo rate and stance again. It also justifies the RBI's relentless pursuit of targeting headline inflation. In this policy the RBI has again buttressed the fact that while



GIRI KVS

Not exactly a status quo policy

KEY TAKEAWAYS. The RBI has explained its food inflation concerns for those who discount them in the context of monetary policy — while flagging financial stability issues

inflation will come down in Q2 of the year to 4.4 per cent, it would be more on account of the base effect and will rise once again to 4.7 per cent in Q3. Therefore, there is a hint that a rate cut is still far away. While all interpretations will be subjective, it does look like that even in October there would be an unchanged position unless the final data is much better than what has been projected. December could be the earliest point of time when the MPC could consider any change in either the stance or rate.

Another takeaway is that the market should not be looking for hints from what other central banks are doing. Often it is felt that if the Fed cuts rates so will the RBI. This time the RBI has stated upfront that there are differential actions being taken by various central banks and while

Often it is felt that if the Fed cuts rates so will the RBI. This time the RBI has stated upfront that there are differential actions being taken by various central banks.

some are cutting their rates or indicating such actions, there are others which are increasing their policy rates.

This should clear the air for the markets as, at times, they tend to go overboard and look to pick up signals from the Fed. This is notwithstanding the fact that the RBI has always maintained that it is driven by domestic considerations and not global actions of central banks.

FINANCIAL STABILITY CONCERNS

Another interesting takeaway in the policy statement is that probably for the first time the central bank has raised some red flags in the area of financial stability. While maintaining that the financial system was stable, it has pointed to some entities which may be overextending their exposures to top-up loans as also the personal loans for consumption purposes. While these are genuine business options, the message is that prudence has to be exercised to ensure that the sanctity of the system is maintained. There is also acknowledgement of the fact that banks are facing challenges on raising deposits as households are diverting funds to the market.

The policy hence is quite different

from the earlier ones even though there has been no policy action taken. There are several clarifications made which explain the rationale behind taking these decisions. These arguments may be taken as being the clinching factors in arriving at the majority decisions, given that even in the past there have been members who had a different view which were related to both the 'growth argument' as well as 'policy effect on food inflation'. As the markets did not really expect any change in policy it was not surprising that there was virtually no change in the stock indices, currency or bond yields.

There is also some messaging for banks when it comes to raising deposits as well as lending which will be taken seriously. The market has become competitive where banks are one part of the structure. With financial literacy spreading there will be a tendency among households to consider all options; as their level of maturity increases, they would like to explore the market. Therefore, the arena has become more crowded on both the lending and borrowing (deposits) side.

The writer is Chief Economist, Bank of Baroda. Views are personal

Tackling patent abuse in bio-pharma sector

The US' efforts, through the Affordable Prescriptions for Patients Act, will discourage innovation

Krishna Sarma

On July 25, 2024, an Australian pharma company filed an infringement suit against Sun Pharma alleging violation of all 20 patents listed in the USFDA Orange Book covering its drug IMVEXXY, a vaginal estrogen therapy. Sun Pharma has filed an Abbreviated New Drug Application (ANDA).

This comes against the backdrop of the US Senate passing the Affordable Prescriptions for Patients Act (APPA) of 2023, on July 11, 2024, that aims to enable early entry of biosimilars (and small molecules) by targeting two allegedly anti-competitive practices of innovative drug manufacturers.

First, APPA seeks to prohibit so-called "product hopping" by classifying it as an unfair method of competition. Under APPA, product hopping occurs in the case of a biologic, when a drug manufacturer "impedes competition" by discontinuing or destroying a reference drug, or taking any action to "unfairly disadvantage" a reference drug relative to a follow-on product within a certain period after being notified that a generic or biosimilar has referenced its product in an ANDA.

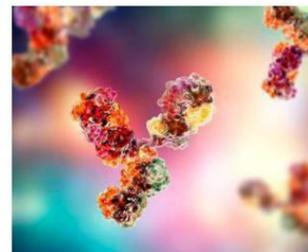
A drug manufacturer may rebut these presumptions by demonstrating that its conduct was not intended to limit competition.

Second, APPA seeks to curb alleged patent thickets for biologic drugs, i.e., a patent portfolio covering methods of manufacture, uses, formulations and other aspects of a single drug, by imposing limits (up to 20 patents) that a reference biological product manufacturer can assert against a company seeking to sell a biosimilar version of the following types of patents in an infringement lawsuit, viz. (i) the biologic product, its method of use, or a method or product used to manufacture the biologic product, (ii) a patent filed more than four years after the reference product received market approval, and (iii) patents that include a claim to a manufacturing process that is not being used by the innovator.

COMPLEX PROCESS

Biologics are fundamentally different from chemically synthesised medicines in a number of ways. Given the enormous inherent chemical and methodological complexities associated with the development and manufacture of biologics, APPA has recognised that method of use and method of manufacture are important and those patents can be asserted.

In India, the issues relating to biosimilars play out in both the patent and regulatory landscape. In relation to patents, recently, the Delhi High Court issued interim orders in a couple of patent infringement cases involving



BIOSIMILARS. Under regulatory lens

biosimilars, restraining the defendant company from marketing and selling their products.

In one case, apart from the patent covering the formulation, the innovator company has asserted a valid and subsisting patent relating to the method for making a composition comprising the formulation and one or more variant which results in a safer and more efficacious drug, and also has a positive impact on the anti-proliferative qualities.

The Indian Guidelines for Similar Biologics, 2016 provide a formal abbreviated market entry pathway. The reference product need not be approved or marketed in India, as long as it is approved in an ICH (International Council for Harmonisation) country.

A biosimilar can be approved on the basis of testing in as few as 100 persons,

which may not have adequate power to detect differences in efficacy between reference product and the biosimilar which can have consequences for patients. On July 22, 2024, concerns over clinical trial of biosimilars was raised in the Rajya Sabha.

In the bio-pharmaceutical industry, most of the breakthrough inventions comprising new compounds are patented as they exhibit potential pharmacological properties required for drug development.

However, several of them require further research, development and technical advancements for successful drug development in order to overcome challenges of toxicity, bio-availability, stability, hygroscopicity, dosage, etc.

All such technical advancements giving rise to a new drug product involving non-obvious inventive step are entitled to patent being "inventions" notwithstanding that they embody the features of earlier patented compound.

While APPA's objective is to prevent bad actors in the bio-pharmaceutical industry from abusing the patent system, in reality, it would create *per se* liability under competition law for the introduction of improved pharmaceutical products that will discourage innovation and will result in fewer improved products and choices for patients.

The writer is Managing Partner, Corporate Law Group

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

Revised stance on LTCG

Apropos 'Capital loss' (August 8), the government's revised stance on capital gain tax not only addresses immediate financial concerns but also reflects a more thoughtful approach to tax policy, acknowledging the diverse economic realities faced by people. But there are fears that the new regime might increase secondary market sales as investors may not retain their properties for too long. However, the government's move underscores the importance of nuanced policy-making that considers both economic principles and public sentiment. The restored indexation benefit is a welcome relief for many,

reaffirming the government's ability to adapt and refine its fiscal policies in the face of legitimate public concerns.

N Sadhasiva Reddy
Bengaluru

Oligopolistic market

This refers to 'Cement consolidation' (August 8). Any organisation has a bounden duty to fulfil its organic objective of staying in business, as many employees bank on it for their livelihood. Oligopolistic firms are prone to ups and downs because of cut-throat competition. But then, the leadership is expected to step up to the plate and never call it quits. India Cements, as a firm under

oligopoly, should have done concrete perspective planning to be in the business.

S Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

Securing UCBS

This refers to "Towards more robust urban co-operative banks" (August 8). At a time when financial irregularities and embezzlements are frequently occurring in this segment, on account of weak systems and procedures and political interventions, appropriate regulations and oversight are indispensable. The prompt corrective actions enforced by the banking regulator in the past in

scheduled commercial banks have enabled them attain the specified parameters concerning capital, NPA, business, and profitability. The proposed prompt corrective action and its enforcement in urban co-op banks will pave the way for them to grow robustly.

VSK Pillai
Changanacherry, Kerala

Weightage in CPI

Apropos 'Govt mulls trimming weight of food in the CPI basket' (August 8), there is definitely a need for revision of items included in the consumer price index (CPI) list. But regarding a downward revision of weightage for food and beverages,

that too a substantial one, needs to be well thought over and any knee-jerk reaction to the recent surveys only will bring in a distortion that would make the CPI unrepresentative of the actual ground reality of the importance of "food and beverages" in the lives of the people. The recently observed skew in consumer spending towards non-food items could be a temporary phenomenon. CPI basket should not be changed based on temporary lows and highs of items in the basket. Changes may be made based on data spanning at least a decade or more.

Kosaraju Chandramouli
Hyderabad

The skills challenge

Budget proposals: Implementation holds the key

Dinesh Sood

One of the top nine priorities of the Union Budget is employment and skilling. In line with this, three schemes were announced to promote skilling. The first scheme involves increasing the maximum loan amount for high-end skilling courses under the revamped Model Skill Loan Scheme from ₹1.5 lakhs to ₹7.5 lakhs, with an interest rate of 1.5 per cent per annum.

This scheme is expected to empower the youth by providing easy access to advanced-level skill courses.

Recognising the significant role played by non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) and micro-finance institutions in the skill loan market, the Ministry of Skill Development and Employment (MSDE) has made pivotal modifications to the scheme.

This includes the inclusion of NBFCs, Micro Finance Institutions, and Small Finance Banks to extend loans backed by a guarantee against default up to 75 per cent of the loan disbursed through the instrument of collateral-free loans of up to ₹7.5 lakh to facilitate 25,000 aspirants every year.

To ensure uninterrupted credit flow in the skilling sector and to provide low-income youths with access to affordable finance for specialised skill courses, the MSDE initially launched the Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Skill Development in July 2015.

But the low fund utilisation under the scheme over the past decade was due to the low ticket size of loans up to ₹1.5 lakh, even as course costs and fees rose due to inflation, leaving many high-cost courses out of the scheme.

Secondly, private banks still need to be more willing to finance government-sponsored schemes. As of March 31, 2024, loans amounting to ₹115.75 crore were extended to just 10,077 borrowers over the past decade.

Relevant skills are in demand, and the cost of acquiring specialised skills is higher. Only 5 per cent of the so-called skilled workforce is formally trained, creating a significant skill gap.

An initiative like the Model Skill Loan Scheme opens doors to many skill courses in sectors such as healthcare, beauty-wellness, IT, AI-data science, cloud applications, digital marketing, hospitality, animation, gaming,



BRIDGING. The skills gap
/ISTOCKPHOTO

graphic designing, and drone technology.

The second scheme is aimed at skilling 20 lakh youth over five years. The scheme, with a total outlay of ₹60,000 crore, aims at fulfilling this objective by upgrading 1,000 Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) in the hub and spoke arrangements with outcome orientation. It's an ambitious scheme that aims to make youth more employable by imparting industry-specific skills.

The third scheme introduced in the Budget is for providing the youth with internship opportunities in 500 top companies. This first-of-its-kind scheme, aiming to cover one crore youth in five years, has the potential to be a game changer in tackling youth unemployment.

Moreover, landing an internship is difficult. Students with professional degrees like MBA, engineering, etc., may still find landing jobs or internships easier after graduation. But it could be more difficult for humanities graduates with no ready-made market-appropriate skill set. So to make this scheme a success a lot depends on its proper implementation.

In the future, the government could consider widening the scope of this scheme by making it mandatory for companies above a specific size to take in a fixed number of interns every year and fund the training programme through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds.

Most importantly, the schemes linked with skills could significantly boost the employability quotient of youth. With concrete experience, they will be more likely to land a job. However, implementation, effectiveness, and accountability are crucial to fostering employable skill sets.

The writer is a co-founder and MD of Orane International and a training partner with the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC). Views expressed are personal



VS SESHADRI

The Economic Survey for 2023-24 suggested that the government needs to consider facilitating investments from China. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal has however ruled out any rethinking by the government on this issue. This has not deterred some more economists weighing in support of the idea.

Currently, Chinese investments can come into the country only through the government route which requires case by case scrutiny. Economists seem to be favouring a more open policy.

One suggestion calls for a more open process under a clearer set of guidelines since case by case review was slow. Chinese investments are also favoured because of China's surplus savings and technology. Some feel that given China's intent to diversify its manufacturing base to overcome Western restrictions, getting Chinese firms to manufacture in India and export those goods is a better option than importing from China.

This viewpoint also notes that such investments could help some of the outgoing dollars from the rising deficit to get ploughed back to India.

Another factor that needs to be considered is China's trade and investment policies and whether liberalising our policies will help in reducing our deficit.

CCP'S GRIP

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) hold on the country's economic management, whether private or state owned, is only tightening. Decisions of the recent 3rd Plenum of the 20th Party Congress that will guide its economic policies for the coming years also make it clear that China will employ industrial policies to further enhance its manufacturing capacities and trade dominance particularly in strategic industries.

But the biggest issue is the huge trade deficit that India has with China, which has also been flagged by the Economic Survey. This is despite all the measures taken by the government so far both on the supply side and on the trade remedy fronts.

While China's share in India's imports in 2023-24 was 15 per cent, it had around 40 per cent or more import share in 18 sectors (that is at HS-2 digit level) and in several of them they are rising. At the individual 8-digit product level of course there are numerous ones at over the 70 per cent level.

With western nations taking



GETTY IMAGES

Should we open the door to Chinese investments?

TRADE ISSUES. There is no certainty that Chinese investments will reduce India's huge trade deficit with China

restrictive measures against Chinese products there is a real possibility that China will redirect its exports to markets like India.

So the question now is will attracting more Chinese investments address the trade deficit issue?

First, if freely allowed, which are the areas that would attract Chinese investments? The Chinese investor will likely invest in areas in which accessing the Indian market is otherwise difficult either due to high tariffs or because of some trade remedy measures or restrictive regulations currently in force.

But those are areas in which the Indian industry has the capacity and may be wary of a foreign competitor. Is that our priority even if some competition may serve us well?

Chinese companies are keen on getting into the EV and renewable space. These are evolving areas in which both technology and capital should be welcome. Equally, India will also need to ensure adequate space for domestic and fronts.

There is no guarantee that more Chinese investments will boost our exports to the West or cut imports of intermediaries and components from China.

other players to curb Chinese domination. These make detailed discussion of the proposals important rather than conveying automatic approvals.

Will Chinese investments go to boost our exports to the West? Will they also reduce the imports that we otherwise receive in the form of intermediaries or components from China? There are no definitive answers to these questions.

That China plus one approach has worked in the case of more export driven Vietnam or Malaysia does not mean it will work for India. If such Chinese investment relocations however come as part of a MNC driven global supply chain the likelihood may be higher.

It is unlikely that Chinese investments will reduce our trade deficit. China's manufacturing trade surplus with ASEAN grew by 3 per cent as a share of recipient GDP for the ASEAN countries between 2019 and 2023, according to a recent Rhodium Group report. This was also a period when Chinese investments into ASEAN were rising. Investments may help integrate the collaborating economies more but reduction in deficit is not assured. Indeed one can envisage a Chinese company in India continuing to source key inputs from the home country with minimal operations here.

China's trade and investment practices such as bringing their own personnel for a variety of tasks is

another factor that needs to be considered. How much local employment they generate would need a case by case assessment.

Finally, China does not seem to be vacating low end or traditional industries since they are still seen as vital source of local employment. So they will continue to retain that space and make sure those industries do not leave China and invest in other countries.

It is interesting that Indonesia's Trade Minister Zulkifli Hasan has, without naming any country, conveyed last month that Indonesia will impose 100-200 per cent duties on seven set of products including textiles, garments, footwear, cosmetics, ceramics and electronics because of the flood of imports of these items, which threaten the existence of micro, small and medium enterprises in Indonesia.

One can imagine from where the flood of goods is coming from. And this is despite rising Chinese investments into Indonesia.

In conclusion it may be preferable to maintain the status quo on investments from China being examined on a case by case basis even as there could be a case for swifter decisions being taken on them.

The writer is a former Ambassador and is currently Senior Fellow for Economic Security at the Delhi Policy Group. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

August 9, 2004

Govt studying options on pvt bank voting rights

The Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram's casting vote could finally decide the fate of the voting rights in private sector banks. The NDA Government's Bill had aimed at removing the voting right cap by deleting the section restricting such rights to 10 per cent in the Banking Regulation Act. Reworking the Bill, officials have forwarded a fresh set of options to the Finance Minister.

Pvt cell operators of encroaching on radio frequency: BSNL

BSNL has complained to the Department of Telecommunication (DoT) that private mobile operators are encroaching on the radio frequency allotted to it. In a letter to the DoT, the company has named Bharti Cellular as one of the companies using radio frequency allocated to BSNL in Punjab.

DaimlerChrysler to step up China, India operations

DaimlerChrysler on Sunday said it was planning a new sales offensive in China by vastly expanding its dealer network. It is also eyeing the Indian market for an expansion drive. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (FASZ) said the company would boost the number of dealers of its luxury brand Mercedes Benz to 217 in 68 Chinese cities by 2012, up from 33 dealers in 23 cities in 2002.

Can Olympics ever be gender balanced?

Anjana PV

The Paris Olympics has been thrust into the spotlight due to a range of issues from food shortages to infrastructure problems.

Among these, gender representation and portrayal have become prominent topics of discussion. Despite initial praise for achieving the best gender representation to date, the 2024 Games are now mired in controversies related to gender.

GENDER REPRESENTATION

The Paris Olympics featured an estimated 10,500 athletes, marking a historic first for the IOC with an equal distribution of quota places between men and women.

The Games will include 329 medal events, with 152 for women, 157 for men, and 20 mixed-gender events. Impressively, 28 out of the 32 sports achieving full gender balance.

COMMENTARY CONTROVERSIES

Despite these promising statistics, the Paris Olympics have faced scrutiny over gender-related controversies. Male commentators have come under fire for inappropriate remarks about female athletes.

In one instance, a Eurosport commentator was suspended for suggesting female swimmers were off fixing their makeup. Another commentator faced backlash for using stereotypical clichés about housewives to describe a tennis player.

British journalist Bob Ballard also made a controversial comment on air after Australia won the 4x100m freestyle relay: "Well, the women just finishing up. You know what women are like ... hanging around, doing their makeup."

ISSUES WITH MEDIA COVERAGE

Olympic Broadcasting Services CEO Yiannis Exarchos highlighted ongoing issues on the portrayal of women in media coverage. He noted that women are still often filmed in ways that



IMANE KHELIF. In the eye of a storm

perpetuate stereotypes and sexism, such as focusing tightly on their faces, a technique not commonly used for male athletes.

This disappointing lack of progress in media representation explains the need for a significant shift in how female athletes are portrayed.

GENDER ELIGIBILITY

A major concern has arisen from the participation of two athletes in women's boxing — Imane Khelif of Algeria and Lin Yu-ting of Taiwan — who have previously failed gender

eligibility tests. Both were disqualified due to having XY chromosomes, typically associated with men, rather than the XX chromosomes of women. The IOC responded, stating that all athletes in the boxing tournament comply with the competition's eligibility and medical regulations.

INCLUSIVE REGULATIONS

Following these events, Khelif and Yu-ting have faced brutal trolling on social media.

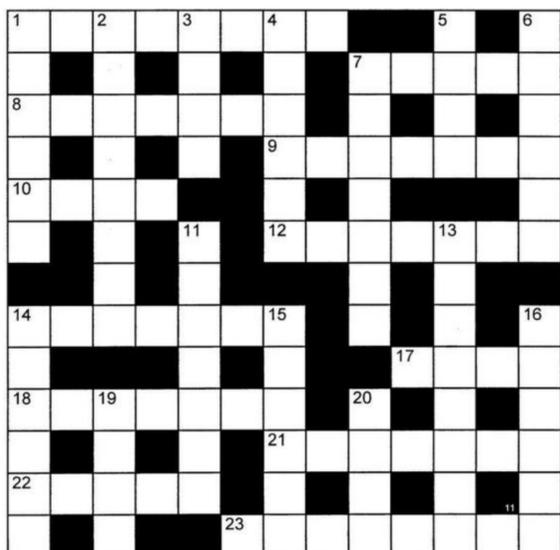
This situation highlights the need for the IOC to hold crucial conversations and establish clear regulations to make sports more inclusive.

The current regulations may lack clarity and could lead to further complexities.

It is essential for sports to be inclusive and free from sexism and misogyny.

With improved regulations from authorities and a renewed attitude among sports enthusiasts, meaningful progress can be achieved.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2500



EASY

ACROSS

- Snow vehicle (8)
- 'Money' (5)
- In wild disorder (7)
- Woman who entertains (7)
- Woman of refinement (4)
- Turn into cash (7)
- Annul, abrogate (7)
- Cease (4)
- Armed vessel (7)
- Drawing, painting (7)
- Body of flowing water (5)
- Downcast (8)

DOWN

- Come to grips with (6)
- Those living at school (8)
- Entrance (4)
- Device to secure position afloat (6)
- Obstinate animal (4)
- Unsubdued (6)
- Far-off (7)
- To what place? (7)
- Give a lesson (8)
- Recognition of merit (6)
- Variagate with spots (6)
- Move out in all directions (6)
- Wander far and wide (4)
- Protracted pain (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Sledge going to soft ground will gain where one is lost (8)
- Money is something one soundly needs (5)
- It was hopelessly confused by Chico at getting it wrong (7)
- Woman entertaining army mess, topless (7)
- She may join youngster and youth-leader (4)
- Come to see it is genuine, and is going east (7)
- If endlessly rich, send out and abrogate it (7)
- Pull-up for bus drivers getting a lot of money back (4)
- Craft shown by Mars, beheaded in a lashing (7)
- An Ancient Briton to rue change, as one might imagine (7)
- Running water the cause of chauffeur failing to start (5)
- Indeed, aircraft carrying a hundred may be out of spirits (8)

DOWN

- Come to grips with a craft's ropes and rigging (6)
- Either they swarm over enemy's side or they stay at school (8)
- College will keep in those that pay to see match (4)
- In a Pagan chorus it may be dropped over the side (6)
- Sort of slipper renowned for its obstinacy (4)
- Although pure, he acts it out (6)
- Don initially is a non-drinker, having an entry far off (7)
- Who is there finishes off, and in what direction? (7)
- This month, curt letters may show one how to be a teacher (8)
- Part that slides in chest given up in recognition of merit (6)
- Last of the custard with fruit to mark in spots (6)
- A goody feast that may make one's waistline do so (6)
- Over the last first, don't stay at home (4)
- Part of the stomach eventually yields to pain (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2499

ACROSS 7. Shark-infested 8. Observatory 12. Gander 14. Evenly 16. Labial 18. Berets 19. Expeditious 23. Problematical

DOWN 1. Shop 2. Arms 3. Mirror 4. Efficacy 5. Oslo 6. Very 9. Bandbox 10. Rondeau 11. Eyes 12. Gall 13. Era 15. Vie 17. Lodges 18. Betray 19. Earl 20. Pubs 21. Omit 22. Sway

OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

MPC waits for US Fed to cut

Until the Federal Reserve cuts interest rates, a reduction in policy rates in India can potentially trigger capital flight or put pressure on the rupee

That the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) would not reduce policy rates on Thursday was widely known. However, the fact that it has retained its policy stance at withdrawal of accommodation suggests that the hawks within the MPC continue to hold sway. Both the policy rate and policy stance setting have seen two dissensions in the last two MPC meetings.

Are these rational decisions? There are good reasons to argue that they are. The benchmark inflation rate continues to be above RBI's target of 4%, and it is expected to remain there until the quarter ending June 2025, the latest period for which MPC has made its forecasts. A 7.2% GDP growth forecast for 2024-25 does not call for any drastic measures to boost economic momentum. Macroeconomic stability and, more importantly, policy commitment to preserve it have become all more the important in a world plagued by geopolitical tensions and growing concerns about a slowdown if not a recession in the world's largest economy.

But it is eminently possible to build an alternative set of arguments as well. The reason inflation is still above RBI's target is food prices. This is largely a result of seasonal supply-side disruptions rather than excess demand in the economy and, therefore, makes higher interest rates pretty much redundant in controlling them. With seasonal shocks becoming increasingly frequent and unpredictable in food markets, it can very well be the case that food inflation will continue to frustrate inflation aligning with target on a long-term basis. Does this mean interest rates will continue to be where they are?

Nobody expects this to be the case, and most independent analysts are expecting MPC to start reducing rates from either its October or December meeting. This underlines the importance of the (tacitly unacknowledged) exogenous factor in MPC's thinking and decisions. Until the US Federal Reserve cuts interest rates, a reduction in policy rates in India can potentially trigger capital flight or put pressure on the rupee. To be sure, this constraint on economic policy in emerging markets like India is systemic in nature and cannot be wished away in the name of asserting autonomy.

Fortunately for India, this systemic constraint has come at a time when the economy is not doing too badly. Of course, this does not undermine the larger challenge of making demand broad-based, which is essential for a sustained revival in private investment and, therefore, overall growth.

Phogat's legacy lies beyond her medals

Vinesh Phogat's Olympic dream lies in tatters, but her status as an athlete has never been higher. Her fight against the system — in wrestling as well as outside — has been heroic, winning her many admirers. Her run to the final of the 50-kg category in women's freestyle at the Olympics ended in disqualification after she failed her second weigh-in. But before the shock exit had come an affirmation of her class as a wrestler. She beat Japanese legend Yui Susaki, who had never been defeated on the international circuit. The win sent shockwaves around the wrestling world, more so because of how difficult Phogat's journey to the Olympics has been.

In January 2023, she was out on the streets protesting against the then Wrestling Federation of India president, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh. Then she had knee surgery and finally a change of her weight class. Each of these challenges could have derailed her, but her heart was set on Olympic glory. That was not to be, but Phogat has shown us that she is much more than an athlete. For girls all over the country, she is an inspiration, someone with integrity, and without fear — a rarity in a country where most sportspeople prefer to toe the line.

The disqualification seems to have pushed her to retire from wrestling, but surely, given what the world has seen of her character, there is more to come from Phogat outside the ring.

Sub-quotas: Rational, yet hard to implement

Unless there is a Punjab-like policy that divides the quota 50-50 for two roughly equal sized broad groups, Bihar's story tells us that sub-quota decisions will be politically rather than empirically driven

B R Ambedkar, chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution and India's first law minister, outlined, with characteristic eloquence, the key challenge facing the new Republic — the superimposition of formal equality (one person, one vote) on a society with substantive inequality, most starkly evident in the hierarchy of the caste system. How does a nation move from equality-in-law towards equality-in-fact?

The answer was to carry forward the system of quotas that certain British territories and princely states had instituted allowing for the entry of untouchables, the most stigmatised *jatis* at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, into higher education and public employment.

Accordingly, untouchability was abolished legally, and certain *jatis* and tribes were identified as eligible for India's reservation system, a policy of compensatory or positive discrimination due to the wide range of social and economic disabilities on

account of marginalisation, discrimination and especially the stigma of untouchability. These are the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, or the SC-ST.

Given the salience of the reservation policy, on paper supported by the entire political spectrum, one would have expected successive governments to track outcomes, introduce self-liquidating features where needed, and add new features. In other words, make the policy malleable for maximum benefit, keeping in mind the larger goal of moving towards equality-in-fact, or substantive equality.

Surprisingly, or perhaps not surprisingly, this has not happened. However, researchers have tried to gauge the impact of reservations on various outcomes. The big picture verdict is that it has benefitted SC-STs as a whole.

The latest Supreme Court verdict has tried to uncover two main layers within the policy. One, have some *jatis* benefitted more than others? If yes, do we need to subdivide the SC quotas into sub-quotas for *jatis*?

Unfortunately, authoritative official *jati*-level data are not available. The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011 did not release *jati*-level information. The national census is severely delayed. Thus, we must triangulate data from different surveys and ethnographic accounts to get a sense of *jati*-level progress on key indicators, without any direct data on the proportion of different *jatis* within SC-reserved seats. This makes it hard for us to gauge if the

progress (or the lack thereof) of a *jati* on key indicators like educational attainment, government employment or income is due to the reservation policy, or not.

It is entirely plausible that access to reservations has been uneven. Indeed, this is not the first time that the subdivision of the SC quota, or quota-within-quota, is sought to be introduced. We have examples from two states, Punjab and Bihar.

The Punjab government in 1975 divided the SC quota into two halves: 50% for the relatively backward Mazhabi Sikhs/Balmikis/Churahs within SCs, and the remaining 50% for the more successful Ad Dharmis/Ravidasis/Ram-dasi Sikhs/Chamars. There are claims about how this increased representation of the former group into government employment, but not via official data.

Bihar created a category of "Mahadalits" (more *dalit* than the Dalits), where initially all but four of the 22 SC *jatis* were designated as such. Nitish Kumar established a Mahadalit Vikas Mission and introduced schemes for housing, education, and loans. Over time, the four remaining castes clamoured for inclusion in the new category; thus Bihar is back to square one, i.e., all SCs are now Mahadalit.

The moral of these stories is that a) quotas-within-quotas could be entirely justified, provided there is systematic tracking of *jati*-level outcomes, and b) given that reservations



The stamp of a stigmatised social identity doesn't disappear easily with economic mobility
HT ARCHIVE

produce tangible benefits even for a small minority, there will be clamour to get into the preferred sub-category, unless there is a Punjab-like policy that divides the quota 50-50 for two roughly equal-sized broad groups. Bihar's story tells us that these decisions will be politically rather than empirically driven.

The Court judgement notes empirical data, and "reasonable" grounds that will be subject to judicial scrutiny, avoiding the perils of "micro-classification", would be needed to convert the idea of a sub-quota into actual policy. Given that there is no sign of the national Census on the horizon, and there is no tracking of reservation benefits at the *jati* level, it is difficult to see how this judgement will get converted into a fair and actionable policy.

The second issue in the court verdict is about families that are economically well-off so that they don't need protective discrimination. The majority opinion recommends a creamy layer exclusion be applied to SC-STs, as it is applied to Other Backward Classes.

The affirmative action policy has quotas as well as monetary benefits (scholarships or freeships), or relaxation (e.g., lower fees). The income criterion can be used to decide on eligibility for the monetary component to

keep the monetary benefits for those who genuinely need it.

However, for quotas, especially in employment, there is no evidence that for historically stigmatised groups, improvement in class status necessarily reduces discrimination, whether in access to jobs, housing or even in the marriage market. Despite untouchability being abolished, covert and overt instances of untouchability persist. As elsewhere in the world, the stamp of a stigmatised social identity doesn't disappear easily with economic mobility. Rohith Vemula's tragic end brought home the fact that for beneficiaries, access to institutional spaces does not naturally translate into acceptance and accommodation.

Reservations have helped in creating a Dalit middle class, which over time can reduce stigma and gradually set the stage for creamy layer exclusion in the future. However, we are not there yet.

The Supreme Court's concern with differential access within the beneficiary groups is not an invalid one, in principle. But where is the empirical evidence that we need to decide on the merits of each case?

Ashwini Deshpande is professor of economics, Ashoka University. The views expressed are personal



Ashwini Deshpande

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya: A composite of contradictions

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, West Bengal's last Communist chief minister (2000-2011), was a contradictory composite of dreamer and doer, liberal and Communist, poet and politician. He was a success and a failure. Even when he withdrew from public life, for health reasons, he was a leader and a powerful presence in West Bengal's politics.

He was the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)'s "tallest leader," an inspiring presence who, even in his isolation, electrified the masses. In 2019, the CPM-Left Front held a large public rally at Kolkata's sprawling Brigade Parade Grounds. Bhattacharya was not billed as a speaker, because his health did not permit it. But he came, pulled by the need to stand in solidarity. His arrival stirred the crowds; everyone wanted to see him. He sat in the car and soaked in the spirit of the massed audience. It was his first public appearance after three years, and his last.

In 2011, when the CPM-led Left Front was comprehensively, if not humiliatingly, defeated by Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, and Bhattacharya lost his Jadavpur seat, few held him responsible for the spectacular failure; his party, the organisation's leadership, the rot that had penetrated deep into the structure were all blamed, and the popular perception was that it was a punishment richly deserved. Bhattacharya became a tragic victim of his party's misdeeds.

The defeat pushed Bhattacharya to retreat from public life and party work. He eventually gave up his party positions and retired into semi-isolation as a member of the CPM. Why Bhattacharya lost even his own seat in the 2011 elections is a puzzle. The party he led lost the elections for reasons that were internal to it and the alienation from both the rural and urban voter bases. He had tried to stem the rot and failed. Banerjee's challenge and her call for *poriborton* (change) had created an alternative political pole, raising expectations of an end to the exhausted Left Front era.

Bhattacharya had big plans for his beloved West Bengal. He set out in 2001, after winning a strong mandate from the people for his first full term as chief minister, to deliver

on his promise of a rapid transformation of the state and its reinvention as an investment, industrial and cultural destination.

From being a supercilious anti-capitalist, he consciously changed tack. He was transparent about it, too. He said for West Bengal, its future, and to fulfil the aspirations of its young, educated millions, he would do what was needed to make change happen. In his memoirs, Bhattacharya reveals that he pondered over the ideological dilemma, studied China's changed trajectory after Deng Xiaoping's One Country, Two Systems formulation, and then was convinced by Amartya Sen, who cautioned him against "viewing globalisation as a monster." He pointed to "the positive outcomes that globalisation could produce."

There was a feverish urgency in his efforts between 2001 and about midway through his second term which ended in 2011. His slogan — Do It Now! — captured the spirit that moved him. It captivated the young and the old, those who had grown bitter and frustrated by the slowness of change, the dribbles of investment in industry, and the political activism that clogged streets and made Kolkata very different from the other state capitals. His push to bring about a transformation in West Bengal was as much a reaction as a deeply felt responsibility.

In his impatience and impetuosity, Bhattacharya did not take into account the peculiarities of West Bengal. Former finance minister and economist Ashok Mitra was brutally clear-eyed; he said that the state had turned insular, and alienated itself in self-imposed isolation. Bhattacharya could not gauge the extent of the resistance that his dreams and ambitions triggered. The Singur-Nandigram resistance and the use of state violence and the CPM's enforcers to quell it was his undoing.

His enthusiasm to jump onto the liberalisation reforms bandwagon to fast forward West Bengal's economic reconstruction destabilised the networks of cross-cutting interests that had supported the CPM and the Left Front. He alienated the trade unions, upset the Muslim voters, and challenged the idea of the Left with its strong opposition to corporates, global capital, and comfort in old equations. It created the space for Banerjee to succeed after decades of fighting the CPM and losing every time. It did not help that the CPM as an organisation was going through a leadership crisis and that his policies were too different; the central leadership of the party rejected his plans and criticised his policies. While Bhattacharya was above criticism, his actions were not.

Bhattacharya was an ardent idealist, a Communist with impeccable credentials. He was sincere, he was honest, and his life was simple, if not austere. He was an intellectual, a playwright, author, poet and practical politician. He was a film buff, a cultured Bengali who loved poetry, the arts, literature and the streets as a space for public protests. He drank tea and smoked incessantly. He was private but very publicly engaged. In his passing, an era has ended.



Shikha Mukherjee

HT ARCHIVE



Buddhadeb Bhattacharya was an ardent idealist, a Communist with impeccable credentials
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Shikha Mukherjee is a senior journalist based in Kolkata. The views expressed are personal

{ DROUPADI MURMU } PRESIDENT OF INDIA

Education has always been close to my heart. I have experienced firsthand, the transformative power of education. Education is also a vehicle for social change and nation building



Quit India Movement and the question of violence

The Quit India Movement, also known as the August *Kranti* (Revolution), was a pivotal chapter in India's freedom struggle. But, every now and then, it is at the centre of a debate on whether it was a non-violent or a violent movement. Mahatma Gandhi's speech on August 8, 1942, the eve of the movement's launch, has its own place in history. An excerpt from the speech goes: "Here is a mantra, a short one, that I give you. You may imprint it on your hearts and let every breath of yours give expression to it. The mantra is: 'Do or Die'. We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery. Every true Congressman or woman will join the struggle with an inflexible determination not to remain alive to see the country in bondage and slavery. Let that be your pledge."

It is clear Gandhiji, let alone direct violence, never even hinted at any form of provocation. This call for non-violent resistance was unique at a time when humanity was engulfed in the fire of World War II. The All India Congress Committee passed the Quit India resolution on August 8, 1942. By the following night, top Congress leaders had been arrested. Thanks to their arrests, an action plan for the movement could not be prepared and communicated. The relatively young leadership of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) became active but had to work underground. Jayprakash Narayan (JP) wrote two long letters while in hiding to guide the revolutionaries, and to explain the character and mode of action of the movement.

Despite facts to the contrary, viceroy Lord Linlithgow alleged that the Congress had tried to overthrow British rule through armed resurrection during the movement. Ram Manohar Lohia wrote a long letter from jail to the viceroy on March 2, 1946. The letter brings out the brutal and conspiratorial character of British imperialism during the Quit India Movement. After playing an underground role in the movement for 21 months, Lohia was arrested in Bombay on May 10, 1944. He was first imprisoned in Lahore Fort, and then in Agra. He suffered inhuman torture at the hands of the British police in Lahore. He was released in June 1946. In the interim, his father passed away, but Lohia refused parole on a matter of principle.

In his letter, Lohia refuted Linlithgow's accusations and spoke about the latter's administration committing horrific atrocities

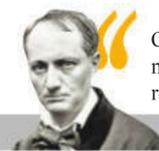
on unarmed participants. He said that the British suppression of the movement led to many Jallianwala Bagh-like incidents, but the people of India persevered non-violently for their freedom. He wrote, "If we had planned an armed insurrection and our crowds were asked to resort to violence, believe me, Linlithgow, Gandhiji would today have been securing a reprieve for you from the free people and their government."

Confronting the viceroy over the barbarism of his administration, he wrote, "You talk of fascist reprisals; your men have raped and killed wives of patriots you could not seize. Yes, the time will soon be ripe for you and your people to face this evidence." In those moments of distress, Lohia was still filled with hope that the sacrifices of tens of thousands of Indians during the movement will be paid for, and wrote, "But I am not unhappy. It has ever been the destiny of India to suffer for others and to take man away from his erring path. The history of the unarmed common man begins from the Indian Revolution of August 9." He further clarified, "We are curious about the future. Whether you win or the Axis, there will be gloom and darkness all around. There is a glimmer of hope. Free India might be able to bring this war to a democratic termination."

JP's two letters to "the soldiers of freedom" were written in December 1942 and September 1943. In both his letters, especially in the first, he raised, and deliberated upon, the question of violence-non-violence at length. He slammed the British government, saying it did not have the right to weigh in on what was the method the people of India used to fight for their freedom. He said that at the core of the Quit India Movement was the resolve not to kill or hurt.

He wrote, "To create hurdles for the British Raj, to overthrow it by paralysing it by every non-violent means, is the basic mantra of that program and 'you can do everything within the realm of non-violence' is our pole star." How a non-violent movement was made possible amidst a raging World War certainly demands serious analysis, if only to give those intellectuals who fixated on the Indian role in violence in 1942 a much-needed perspective.

Prem Singh is a former professor, Delhi University, and a fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. The views expressed are personal



Genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will

Charles Baudelaire

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

TAKE LEGAL ROUTE TO CURB STEEP FEE HIKES IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

THE new academic year has not begun on a happy note for a legion of parents in Tamil Nadu. Apart from having to cope with the menace of the high retail inflation that has drilled a hole in household budgets, parents are now facing the brunt of increased school fees. Some schools have arbitrarily increased fees by as much as 30-50 percent or more, claiming that their operational costs have gone up several folds.

Are private schools free to increase the fees at will? Tamil Nadu follows a fee-fixing model and has set up a TN Private Schools Fee Determination Committee, as suggested by the Supreme Court in 2009. Under the Tamil Nadu Schools (Regulation of Collection of Fees) Act, 2009, the panel is empowered to verify and approve fee structures proposed by private schools. Each school is supposed to submit the fee hike proposal, accompanied by their books of accounts and other claims. The committee's job is to ensure that the school management's move is not leading to profiteering and to approve the proposal or suggest an alternative after verifying the documents.

Over the years, the state government has faced a series of court battles on school education. In 2012, a division bench of the Madras High Court ruled in favour of the state government that CBSE schools would come under the purview of the fee committee. However, private CBSE-affiliated schools later managed to get an interim order from the Supreme Court, which allowed them to fix fees on their own. For the past several years, the state government has not challenged the order.

In the last decade, Tamil Nadu has seen a steep increase in the number of CBSE schools. The number has gone up from 390 in 2013, including those run by the central government, to 1,617 in 2024. Of late, the state has witnessed a flood of complaints from parents about fee hikes. The fee committee has made it clear that it has no mandate to fix the fees of the CBSE-affiliated schools unless the stay is lifted by the court. State governments, aggrieved parents, or their associations should approach the Supreme Court on the matter. A fee-fixing model for all private schools should bring some semblance of reconciliation between parents and school managements.

STEER TELANGANA LOCAL SEAT QUOTA WITH CARE

THE question whether a student is to be considered a local or non-local for admission to educational institutions—in particular for MBBS and BDS courses—is sensitive in almost every state; but it is felt more intensely in Telangana. Historically, this issue has played a key role in several agitations. In this backdrop, the recent order of the state government redefining the local category status for admission to medical courses has understandably led to protests.

With the 10-year period for including students from Andhra Pradesh ending, the Telangana government has rightly amended the provision. But in doing so, it has left the door open to criticism. As per government order 33, students who study from class 9 to the intermediate level, or those who have resided in the state for four years or more by the time of the exam will be considered for the local quota. The government dropped the earlier criterion that students who have studied for at least four years in the state from classes 6 to 12 could also avail of the quota. It makes little sense to drop the latter while the number of medical colleges has increased after 2014. There are over 8,700 medical seats in the state, half of them in government-run colleges. However, the competition is cut-throat.

Though Health Minister Damodar Rajanarasimha claims the new order will not be a disadvantage for Telangana students, it is bound to raise a number of questions. There could be any number of state students studying intermediate in other states; conversely, there could be a substantial number of students from other states studying in Telangana for four consecutive years. The state government ought to reconsider the rules to ensure that genuine local candidates do not lose out.

The issue has already taken a political dimension with the opposition BRS going hammer and tongs at the government. The pink party, following its electoral drubbing, sees in this an opportunity to reinvent itself as the sole champion of the Telangana sentiment. But these hyper-sensitive issues should be dealt with carefully, lest they acquire a momentum of their own and cause disharmony. The state government would be well advised to reconsider the matter before frustrated students take to the streets.

QUICK TAKE

ABUSE NOT A WEAPON

ISRAELI rights group B'Tselem has released a detailed report on the country's policy of using prisoner abuse and torture in Gaza. The report lists harrowing accounts of sexual abuse and arbitrary violence. Israeli soldiers also took pictures of female detainees in degrading circumstances and uploaded them online. The report came days after the country's military detained nine soldiers accused of severe abuse of a prisoner. This is not the first report of its kind. In February, UN experts had expressed alarm over similar cases, including those targeting women and children. Whatever course the war takes, the world cannot let this pass unpunished: abuse cannot be allowed as a weapon of war.

THE calamity in Wayanad, the most devastating landslides in Kerala's history, is not just a wakeup call—it is a death-knell, one that had long been tolling. Yet instead of introspecting, learning from our mistakes and ensuring we never again repeat them, we in India focus on immediate relief (which Kerala does well), then on rehabilitation (which Kerala does less well), and then lapse into business-as-usual. This failure to rise above our political inertia prevents us from safeguarding our future from more such cataclysms.

On Saturday, August 3, I made an emotionally searing visit to Wayanad and assisted in the distribution of relief supplies gathered by the MP office in Thiruvananthapuram. Picking my way through the rubble to view the destruction in Mundakkai, Chooralmala and Punchiri Matam, I beheld JCBs rumbling where, till five days ago, lavishly verdant, hilly and scenic villages had sprawled beneath great blue skies. I saw the fortunate in a relief camp.

At a hospital suffused with the anguish of those whose homes and dreams were pulverised by a bombardment of rocks and boulders in the early hours of July 30, I met a young survivor who had endured unimaginable horrors. At eight years of age, she had lost her father, mother, brother, sister, grandfather and grandmother, and sustained numerous injuries, from broken bones to a heavily bruised face. As I watched her propped up in bed, immersed in her colouring book, desolation gripped me. After all, we should have been able to prevent what she had endured.

Kerala's battle-lines with the ferocity of nature, exacerbated by climate change, have long been drawn. The writing has again been on the wall since February 2023, when ISRO's National Remote Sensing Centre (NRSC) published the Landslide Atlas of India, ranking Wayanad as the 13th most vulnerable region for landslides among 147 districts in 17 states and two Union territories. Indeed, 13 of Kerala's 14 districts are among the 50 most landslide-prone Indian regions.

When a landslide struck Wayanad's Puthumala in 2019, no special new measures were taken in the surrounding areas. Over five years later, in the secrecy of a misty and chilly night, 86,000 square kilometres of forest slipped off high in the Velarimala hills, and tumbling into a turgid Iruvazhinjipuzha (whose course it altered), hurtled down the hillsides, devouring Mundakkai, Chooralmala, Attamala and Noolpuzha, reducing their residents to figures in a tragic death toll. Upwards of 300

Thirteen of Kerala's 14 districts are prone to landslides. But little was done after Puthumala was struck in 2019. We must use suitable technologies to guard against future tragedies

LEARNING THE RIGHT LESSONS FROM THE WAILS OF WAYANAD

SHASHI THAROOR



Fourth-term Lok Sabha MP from Thiruvananthapuram and Sahitya Akademi winning author of 24 books, most recently *Ambedkar: A Life*



MANDAR PARDIKAR

bodies have been found, while more than 200 souls remain missing, the odds of their still being alive dwindling by the day.

Ecologically, Kerala is deeply fragile; not only did it record the highest number of landslides in India between 2015 and 2022, there has not been a single year between 2017 and 2022 when a natural calamity—whether cyclone, flood, or landslide—did not lash it. Some ecological issues contributing to the current catastrophe include widespread deforestation, with 62 percent of Wayanad's forests having disappeared between 1950 and 2018; ceaseless soil erosion, made more relentless by rainwater seeping into loose topsoil, which reduces soil cohesion and contributes to landslides; and soil piping, the formation of underground tunnels because of subsurface soil

erosion. The Puthumala landslide scarred Wayanad with extensive soil piping, which aggravated these landslides.

Climate change is worsening the situation, especially with more flash floods and landslides being triggered by merciless monsoons. As climate scientists have revealed, the extreme warming of the Arabian Sea has created deep cloud systems, which result in brief spells of ruthlessly intense rainfall, making Kerala yet more vulnerable to landslides. The 'heavy rain' predicted for the area was 52-200 mm over a week; instead, 522 mm fell in a matter of hours, far more than the saturated soil could absorb. The hill just collapsed.

A day after tragedy struck Wayanad, I wrote to Home Minister Amit Shah, urging him to declare this upheaval a 'Calam-

IS INDIA READY TO WELCOME CHINESE CAPITAL AGAIN?

THE Economic Survey for 2023-24 sprang a surprise by making a strong pitch for Chinese investments in India, indicating a turn from the government's anti-China stance of the past four years during which relations hit a new low. Though the Survey's views are attributed to the chief economic advisor (CEA), the finance minister subsequently lent support, signalling a clear policy shift.

The CEA and his team tried to soften the shock of the sudden change in stance by harping on the 'China plus one strategy', which involves reducing the excessive dependence on China-led production networks. However, several developments, including some amendments in India's tariff structure included in the recent budget proposals are pointers to improving economic relations between the neighbours.

The relations fell to a low in 2020 following Chinese incursions in the Galwan valley. India swiftly responded by taking a slew of measures aimed at restricting participation of Chinese companies in India. The first of these came in March 2020 through the announcement that companies of a country "that shares land border with India or where the beneficial owner of an investment into India is situated in or is a citizen of any such country" would be subject to government scrutiny before they can invest in the country. Alongside, a large number of Chinese apps were banned.

However, the major problem was India's high degree of import dependence on China. This was being viewed with concern especially because of the security implications of importing increasing quantities of Chinese electronic goods and critical components. For instance, in 2018-19, over 90 percent of India's mobile and personal computer imports were from China. Equally disconcerting was the high level of import dependence on active pharmaceutical ingredients, or intermediates for several critical medicines produced in India. China was almost the only source for streptomycin, ciprofloxacin, amoxicillin and rifampicin, used for treating bacterial infections.

This import dependence in critical materials was a symptom of the failing health of India's manufacturing sector, whose share of the GDP has been stuck around 16-17 percent for decades. Though recommendations were being made for strengthening manufacturing at least since 2006, the first steps towards this end were taken only in the wake of the Galwan conflict.

THE production linked incentive (PLI) scheme was initiated covering the electronics and pharmaceutical sectors. Over time, the scheme was extended to cover 14 industries, including ones for the green energy transition and for ushering in 'Industry 4.0', or new-age smart manufacturing.

Though the PLI scheme was expected to reduce import dependence on China, its tardy implementation meant that this ob-



Though diplomatic relations have hit a low after China's incursions at Galwan, the trade balance has worsened for India. Now the finance minister has backed the Economic Survey's suggestion of shifting India's stance on Chinese investments. What does it say about the manufacturing schemes aimed at self-reliance?

jective was not realised. In most industries—with the notable exception of mobile phones—planned augmentation of capacities has not been realised. Moreover, it is too early to say whether the capacities in place can stand up to global competition.

Meanwhile, imports from China have increased rapidly. The department of commerce reported between 2020-21 and 2023-24, Chinese imports had increased nearly 56 percent, while Chinese customs administration reported the country's exports to India had increased 65 percent. Interestingly, both authorities reported that India's exports to China had decreased—by 21 percent in the Indian count and 16 percent by the Chinese calculation. So, it was China

decreasing its dependence on India.

It is in the backdrop that the policy shift towards Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) proposed in the Economic Survey should be read. The Survey makes three arguments in favour of attracting FDI from China. First, it argues that FDI inflows "from China can help in increasing India's global supply chain participation along with a push to exports". Second, it says that relying on Chinese FDI "seems more promising for boosting India's exports to the US, similar to how East Asian economies did in the past". Finally, the Survey opines that "as the US and Europe shift their immediate sourcing away from China, it is more effective to have Chinese companies invest in India and then export the products to these markets, rather than importing from China, adding minimal value, and then re-exporting them".

Thus, in just four years, the official sentiment seems to have deviated from the narrative of an Atmanirbhar Bharat becoming a global manufacturing hub on its own strength to one that will be partly dependent on Chinese capital for global engagements. More importantly, the views expressed in the Economic Survey appear to have resonated in the Union Budget proposals in two ways. First, the finance minister made no mention of the PLI scheme in her speech when the general expectation was that she would prioritise its re-orientation. Second, critical minerals such as lithium, nickel, cobalt and vanadium, among others, used for the production of batteries, space vehicles and nuclear reactors, can now be imported duty-free, while import duty on mobile phones have been reduced from 20 percent to 15 percent. These are possibly the first steps to incentivise Chinese producers to invest in India.

Does this imply that the commendable ambitions written into the PLI scheme and Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan to transform India into a strong, independent and globally competitive manufacturing hub are passé? The answer may become apparent in the next few months. (Views are personal) (bisjit@gmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Shocking rule

Ref: 100gms bury Vinesh's medal dream (Aug 8). The whole nation was in a state of disbelief that 100g extra deprived Indian athlete Vinesh Phogat of her medal. Rules in suits and authority were quick to say 'rules are rules'. It is typical of sports like wrestling, boxing, karate etc to have this rule for athletes so their strength is matched. But if that is the case, basketball players also should be segregated as per height. Vijay Vir Mangla, Bengaluru

Conspiracy hint

An entire nation is heartbroken due to the disqualification of Vinesh Phogat. The disqualification looks conspiratorial on two grounds. One, the ruling was announced hours after she entered the final, just before playing. Two, her being overweight by 100g was too small to disqualify her. No drugs caused the increase. Metabolic activities of the body are bound to vary weight now and then. A mere 100g will not affect the opponent. Manoharan Muthuswamy, Ramanathapuram

Stoic Vinesh

The exasperated photograph of Vinesh Phogat with P T Usha reflects how badly she was shaken at the turn of events. No one, including her rivals, would have thought this kind of fate would befall on her. The bold, courageous and resilient Vinesh resigning to stoicism is a shock to everyone. DS Gururaj, Bengaluru

Mandated internships

Ref: Bridging educational gaps with internships (Aug 8). Our educational system must be thoroughly revamped. Any job seeker after obtaining qualifications should be able to implement their knowledge practically. Governments should chalk out a plan mandating a certain percentage of internships in top companies in every field. The employers can be compensated with possible sops. Krishnan OV, Ezhome

Alarming infection

Ref: Awareness crucial to avoid lethal infection (Aug 8). People need to be aware of this alarming infection. They need to practice caution before entering any water place. Aditya Kamble, Kalaburagi

Regulating waqfs

Ref: Waqf bill may go to House panel after it is tabled today (Aug 8). It is time to trim and regulate those sweeping and no-holds-barred powers enjoyed by the waqf board that is immune from prescribed rules. The new bill will effectively check the board's unbridled powers in claiming any land on the sly as its own. SLakshmi, Hyderabad

Staying the course

Mr Das has set the record straight

The 50th Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), which ended on Thursday, was widely expected to be a non-event. In line with market expectations, the committee decided to leave the policy rate and stance unchanged. Consequently, the policy repo rate remains at 6.5 per cent. The MPC also decided to retain the growth and inflation projections. It expects the Indian economy to expand 7.2 per cent this financial year. The growth rate in the first quarter of next financial year is expected to be the same — 7.2 per cent. On inflation, the committee expects the headline inflation rate to average 4.5 per cent this financial year. The rate is projected to be 4.4 per cent in the first quarter of 2025-26.

Although the broad monetary policy announcements were on expected lines, the high point of the day was the decision of RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das to underline the fundamentals of inflation targeting, monetary-policy operations, and financial stability. The latest Economic Survey suggested: "India's inflation targeting framework should consider targeting inflation, excluding food." The primary reason was that food inflation is often not demand-induced but is a result of supply shocks, and short-run policy tools are more appropriate to address price pressures emanating from excess aggregate demand growth. As also argued by this newspaper earlier this week, ignoring food inflation is not advisable. Mr Das did well to set the record straight. It should help address all doubts. Some of the broad points are worth emphasising here.

The legally binding target of the RBI is the headline consumer price indexed inflation rate. Food has a weighting of about 46 per cent in the index and, thus, cannot be ignored. The consumer understands inflation in terms of food prices rather than other components. Notably, the food inflation rate contributed more than 75 per cent to the headline inflation rate in May and June. Further, it affects household inflation expectations, which have implications for the future trajectory of inflation outcomes. In fact, household inflation expectations have edged up in recent months. Persisting high food inflation can affect expectations and spill over to the core rate. A behavioural shift among households can make overall inflation outcomes sticky with higher economic costs. The MPC can always look through transitory increases in food prices. However, a more persistent increase cannot be ignored.

In the context of financial and banking stability, the governor noted for retail investors, alternative avenues were becoming more attractive, and banks were facing challenges in mobilising deposits, which were trailing loan growth. Consequently, banks are raising funds from other sources, which can potentially lead to structural liquidity issues. It was also highlighted that certain segments of personal loans continued to grow at a rapid pace despite last year's presumptive regulatory action. While there is no imminent risk to financial or banking stability, and the Indian banking system is well capitalised, some of these observations can be seen as an indication for the system to address potential risks in time. The RBI also did well not to overreact to the recent global financial-market turmoil. Given the strong position on the external front and with economic growth momentum expected to continue, the MPC rightly decided to stay the course and focus on inflation management.

Chinese dependence

India has difficult choices

The Union government has decided to expedite and streamline visa approval for Chinese technicians involved in manufacturing, which must be welcomed. The initiative is expected to ease complications, particularly for the 14 sectors under the production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes. According to new norms, which came into effect this month, after a company makes the application, it will be forwarded to relevant government departments for approval and they will have to send their response to the Union home ministry in 28 days. It is expected that the overall process will take 30-45 days and the business e-visa will be valid for six months. Several businesses had argued that visa-related matters were affecting production and productivity. It is to be hoped that the initiative will address such concerns and that visas will also be issued for companies not within the purview of PLI schemes.

While the government has addressed the visa problem, another big issue being debated is that of Chinese investment, particularly in the context of remarks made in the latest Economic Survey. Given China's dominant position in global supply chains, it is perhaps impossible for India to become an integral part of these networks independently. The pervasive reach of Chinese manufacturing means that any effort by India to enhance its role in global supply chains will inevitably intersect with Chinese interests and operations. The visa issue also clearly underscores this point. Given the situation, India has two options — integrate more deeply into China's supply chains, which can increase import, or promote foreign direct investment (FDI) from China in the manufacturing sector. The Survey favoured the latter, citing examples of Brazil and Turkey, and argued that encouraging FDI would boost domestic manufacturing and thereby enhance export. Chinese investment in India, resulting in increased production, can also help reduce the trade deficit, bring in technology, enhance managerial skills, and lower production costs. However, these benefits come with considerable concern and risks. The influx of Chinese capital and influence may pose risks, for example, to data security, which could compromise national security and economic sovereignty by creating information vulnerabilities.

The government mandated in 2020 that investment from countries sharing land borders with India would need its approval. However, as things stand, India's reliance on imported inputs from China for critical sectors such as semiconductors, automobiles, and telecommunications is increasing, with the trade deficit reaching a staggering \$85 billion in 2023-24. Besides, the trade figures alone do not provide a complete picture, as Chinese firms could be rerouting their supplies through countries such as Vietnam. Thus, dependence on China, coupled with current regulations and national security concerns, creates a highly complex environment. Given the geopolitical situation, it would not be easy for the government to simply open the door for Chinese investment. However, as the visa decision underscores, it is also true that China cannot be ignored if India has to integrate into the global value chain in any meaningful manner, which is critical to boosting manufacturing. There are no easy answers here. The Economic Survey must be commended for starting the debate, which will hopefully help find an acceptable solution.

Don't count on a growth miracle

In a volatile global landscape, sustained growth rate of more than 7 per cent is quite a challenge



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

The recent Budget has assumed real gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 6.5 per cent for FY25. The latest Economic Survey forecasts growth of 6.5-7 per cent. Would-be reformers in India are asking for more. They urge the government to do whatever it takes to boost GDP growth to 8, 9 or even 10 per cent. Aiming for a higher growth rate has become a sort of test of the government's machismo.

The gratifying part of current growth aspirations is that there is a sense all around that a long-term growth rate of 6.5 per cent for India is achievable. Yet, few had forecast such an outcome, least of all after the Covid pandemic struck India in March 2020.

For years, commentators warned us that a growth rate higher than 5-6 per cent would not be possible unless the government summoned the will to push through "second-generation" reforms. The slowdown in growth during the three years preceding the pandemic seemed to confirm these apprehensions.

None of those reforms have happened. Yet, the economy grew at over 7 per cent for three years after the pandemic and is now poised for a fourth year of growth close to 7 per cent.

In FY24, as the Economic Survey points out, the Indian economy returned to the pre-pandemic growth trajectory. This is an impressive feat. The US returned to the trajectory even earlier, then veered off and returned to the trajectory a second time. Europe is yet to get back to the pre-pandemic growth trajectory. China got back very quickly to the pre-pandemic trajectory but has since departed from it. India's recovery appears more sure-footed. That is something to celebrate.

High growth rates after the pandemic have been driven by rising capital expenditure at the Centre.

Critics said such increases were unsustainable. They said such increases would happen at the expense of fiscal consolidation and would cause the public debt-to-GDP ratio to rise. Unless private investment picked up, growth would sputter.

They have been proved wrong on these counts as well. The central government's capital expenditure as a proportion of GDP has doubled from 1.7 per cent in FY20 to 3.4 per cent in FY25. Yet, the gross fiscal deficit is projected to rise from 4.6 per cent to merely 4.9 per cent of GDP. The total public debt-to-GDP ratio fell from FY21 to FY23 and rose marginally in FY24. Growth remains robust without the desired rise in private investment. Public investment-led growth has turned out to be more sustainable than analysts had thought.

The reforms brigade now clamours for even higher GDP growth driven by further reforms — more fiscal consolidation, more privatisation, more labour reforms, more free trade. The clamour appears disconnected from reality. It is not just that the "second-generation" reforms have proved to be politically infeasible for nearly two decades and look even more remote in today's setting. It is that growth miracles — growth of over 7 per cent for long periods

— are rare for a middle income country (MIC) and will become rarer still in the emerging global economic environment.

That is the stark message from the World Bank's World Development Report (WDR), 2024. The report focuses on the difficulties nations face in breaking out of the "Middle Income Trap", that is, those with annual income per capita ranging from \$1,136 to \$13,845. India is now a lower MIC. It seeks to join the ranks of higher income countries by 2047 by



FINGER ON THE PULSE

T T RAM MOHAN

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Purvodaya for eastern revival

From the solar chakras of Konark to the teascented breezes of Darjeeling, from Nalanda's phoenix-like resurgence to the Brahmputra's life-giving pulse, eastern India ascends not as a lone star but as the lodestar in India's competitiveness odyssey.

Budget 2024 amplifies this strategic pivot through the Purvodaya initiative, a plan for the all-round development of the eastern part of India. It recognises that unlocking the East's diverse factor endowments — from Odisha's mineral wealth to Andhra's coastal corridors, from Bihar's agricultural heartland to Jharkhand's industrial potential, and from West Bengal's dynamic services sector to its strategic trade gateways — is paramount for charting India's course towards becoming a developed country by 2047.

Eastern states collectively hold a substantial portion of India's natural resources, including around 80 per cent of the country's iron ore and 100 per cent of its coking coal, along with significant reserves of chromite, bauxite, and dolomite. Their strategic advantages include major ports such as Paradip, Haldia, Vizag, and Kolkata, which account for over 30 per cent of India's major port capacity, as well as three major national waterways and robust road and rail connectivity to most parts of the country. Despite these strengths, these states contributed only around 17.26 per cent to India's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022-23. This is because these states significantly lag behind other Indian states in both economic development and social progress.

The combined population of these states is approximately 350 million, representing nearly 27 per cent of India's total population. Despite this, the GDP per capita in these states has shown minimal growth over the past 11 years, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) below the national aver-

age, except for Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, which have achieved 5.5 per cent and 6 per cent growth, respectively. The GDP per capita in these states is lower than India's average per capita level.

Indian states, with their large population and diverse economies, often surpass many countries in terms of size. When viewed through the lens of these countries, the economic disparities among the eastern states become strikingly clear. For instance, let us look at Bihar. Not only does it have the lowest per capita income in India, but it also ranks among the lowest globally, even below countries like Somalia and Sudan. On the other hand, while Japan—a country with a similar population size —boasts a per capita income around \$33,000, Bihar's per capita income is around \$420 in exchange rate terms. Similarly, West Bengal faces its own economic challenges. With a GDP per capita of approximately \$967, West Bengal's GDP per capita level is markedly lower compared to countries with similar population sizes, such as Vietnam, which has a GDP per capita of around \$4,623.

When examining these states through a microscopic lens, the stagnation over the past 11 years becomes evident. While direct comparisons between states and countries have limitations because they are at different stages of development, they highlight the need for targeted development strategies. These figures not only highlight limited economic advancement but also underscore persistent socio-economic challenges. The lower social progress rankings for these and other eastern states further illustrate the need for focused development strategies. Bridging these gaps is essential for enabling these regions to contribute more effectively to India's overall prosperity.

Overall, despite their vast mineral wealth and locational advantages, the eastern states remain



AMIT KAPOOR & SHEEN ZUTSHI

"carrying a cricket bat to the park, regardless of whether there was a match to play; he was well attuned to and unsurprised by the racism and violence he encountered." Mr Ahluwalia, on the other hand, "didn't feel othered." Instead, his "whiteness insulated" him.

Mr Ahluwalia also engages with identity beyond individual experiences, particularly in the second chapter titled "My Name Is Jassa Ahluwalia and I Have Imperial Nostalgia." The arguments here are scholarly and meticulously question classical heroes — such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* — and interpretations of history. It ends with an interesting story in which the author relates how his "legal name" almost killed him.

The (ongoing) discrimination in cinema against non-white people is well documented in the chapter "Half-Casting". Interestingly, here, too, Mr Ahluwalia offers some intriguing trivia. Mumbai-born British actress Merle

Oberon hid her mixed heritage her entire life. Later, pop culture would remark that Michelle Yeoh was the second Asian to be nominated for the Oscar for Lead Actress — and the first to have won — because the first was Oberon. To that end, the author concludes: "Being a chameleon is part of the joy of being an actor, but I wanted to play with my true colours."

BOTH NOT HALF: A Radical New Approach to Mixed Heritage Identity
Author: Jassa Ahluwalia
Publisher: HarperCollins
Pages: 344
Price: ₹499

A person's identity is a spectrum, and one of them is defined by nationalism — the narrative a nation forces on individuals, which Mr Ahluwalia discusses thoroughly in "Useful Fictions, Dangerous Narratives". The chapter documents the myths that leaders offer to amass support, the kind of insecurities majorities develop to threaten — and often murder — minority communities, how language politics divides and unites and, most importantly, how embracing this part of one's identity is crucial, but to be blinded by it is foolish. A good memoirist must be vulnerable

economically underdeveloped compared to other regions in India. Addressing these disparities is critical to achieving balanced national development and fully realising these states' economic potential. The Purvodaya plan, as outlined in the 2024 Budget, aims to tackle these critical issues by focusing on human resource development, infrastructure enhancement, and the creation of economic opportunities. This regional renaissance holds the promise of balancing inclusive growth with competitive advantage, orchestrating a harmonious progress that reverberates across India's diverse economic landscape. If implemented effectively, it could serve as a transformative force, symbolising a commitment that as the sun rises in the east, so too will India's prominence on the global stage.

As we advance towards our goal of becoming a developed economy by 2047, it is essential to extend similar efforts to the north-eastern part of the country. The Northeast, which contributes around 2.9 per cent to India's GDP, faces unique challenges that inhibit its growth and development. These include geographical isolation, infrastructure deficits, and socio-political issues that create barriers to economic integration and development. However, the region also possesses unique strengths, such as rich natural resources, a vibrant cultural heritage, and a strategic geographical location bordering several Southeast Asian countries. These attributes offer significant opportunities for economic growth if harnessed effectively.

Advancing economic and social development in the eastern part of India is not a sprint but a marathon, demanding sustained effort and commitment from all stakeholders, particularly state governments and private players. By tackling hurdles head-on and harnessing its unique assets, the eastern part of India can be a catalyst and play a pivotal role in advancing India towards a more prosperous and equitable future.

The writers are, respectively, chair and research manager at Institute for Competitiveness

Mixed feelings about identity



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

In the first chapter of *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (Penguin, 2022), titled "Heritage, Childhood, Family, Origins", the 2019 Booker Prize-winning author Bernardine Evaristo notes that growing up she was labelled "half-caste" — a term for biracial people at that time.

Ms Evaristo was born in 1959 to a Nigerian father and an English mother. The British actor, writer and filmmaker Jassa Ahluwalia was born in 1990 to an English mother and a Punjabi father. The three decades between them underline the fact that the discourse and

vocabulary related to mixed heritage didn't advance beyond "half", as if there's a neat calculus to mixed inheritance.

Ms Evaristo tried to understand identity and articulate the hurt that people with mixed heritage end up accumulating while growing up in an unwelcoming environment. In *Both Not Half: A Radical New Approach to Mixed Heritage Identity* Mr Ahluwalia explores the various facets of mixed identity.

Published in May and divided into eight chapters that cover a range of subjects — from casting people of mixed heritage in movies to masculinity and queerness to discovering the essence of one's faith — the book is timely in light of the race riots that have erupted in the UK.

It begins with an interesting anecdote. It's 1994. At a wedding in Moga, Punjab, three-year-old Ahluwalia is dancing joyously, though he's unable to find his "rhythm". Despite his blonde hair and white skin, he was "the very image of a Punjabi folk dancer" as one can see in the video that his father made

on a camcorder that the writer has published on his Instagram. In the same video, he is wearing a pageboy suit doing Bhangra to *dhol* beats.

Juxtapose this with a grown-up Jassa's irritation when a street vendor thinks he is white. Mr Ahluwalia narrates this incident in his viral TEDx Talk and notes in the book: "*Oh shad deh yaar, mera sir part bhappya! Kuni vari main kya, mere kul paani hai! Kisi hor nu thang kar!*" (Translation by the author: "Leave it dude, my head is killing me, I've said so many times, I've got water, go bother someone else.")

These incidents can be considered cornerstones in understanding identity — how it's shaped not only by one's self-image developed in a sheltered environment but also by the biases people have internalised for aeons. Mr Ahluwalia articulates this brilliantly in this book. The differences between his and his father's experiences are telling. Mr Ahluwalia's brown father, who had moved to the UK in 1973, had grown up

in the face of events. Mr Ahluwalia accepts the fact that he wasn't a good ally to his queer, brown sister Ramanique, and grieves and rekindles his relationship with his grandmother ("BG") by understanding the underlying principles of Sikhism. In the chapter "Adventures in Masculinity," he talks about experiencing non-normative desires and how toxic masculinity is detrimental to living a more fulfilling life.

The bouquet of issues that Mr Ahluwalia tackles in this book makes it clear that writing about identity is a tricky business. However, he makes it look easy. His book also seems to be doing what *Manifesto* did to Ms Evaristo, who writes, "As a race, the human one, we all carry our histories of ancestry within us, and I am curious as to how mine helped determine the person and writer I became." It's the history that wasn't available readily to Mr Ahluwalia, which is why he wrote *Both Not Half* to fill this gap.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based writer and freelance journalist. On Instagram/X: @writerly_life

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