



Movies are a physical experience, and are remembered as such, stored up in bodily synapses that evade the thinking mind

Frederic Jameson

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

## MAJHI MUST CONTAIN ROT IN ODISHA LAW AND ORDER MACHINERY

SADLY, police brutality is not new in India. But the assault on an army officer and the alleged sexual abuse of his fiancée in a police station of Bhubaneswar has certainly taken it to a new low. The couple, harassed by a mob after a road rage incident, walked into Bharatpur police station on the city's outskirts to lodge a complaint and seek redress in the early hours of September 15. Hours later, the manner in which the two complainants ended up being booked themselves after having been illegally confined, humiliated and manhandled has left the country outraged and Odisha shamed.

When the protector turns predator on a justice seeker in a state capital, it symbolises that the law and order situation is in a perilous state. What happened with the army officer and the lawyer-restaurateur displayed the ugly innards of a system where the rot has set in for long. It was the previous BJD government that had systematically weakened the police machinery for its political interests. It created a parallel system and vested powers with a chosen few to run its dictum. Even police chiefs stopped to matter at some point of time. The structurally weak and unstable system was only waiting to implode.

The Mohan Majhi government has been at the receiving end for this deplorable incident. It has ordered a crime branch probe, suspended the errant officials and directed a judicial inquiry to be completed in 60 days. But it has clearly shown its ineptness on law and order. Busy fulfilling its election promises, it has grappled to contain multiple communal flare-ups and a spate of violent crimes. More than three months in the power now, it has not even been able to effect the customary reshuffle of senior police officials that has led to a precarious stagnancy across districts and major posts.

Blaming the previous government is not going to help the BJP administration on matters of deteriorating law and order. Its ecosystem's attempt to deflect criticism by naming and shaming its own officers will not work either. It needs to take firm control of the system and provide direction. And for that, Mohan Majhi, who is also the home minister, must step up. He can barely afford another such disaster, as it reflects poorly on his party nationally, too.

## MORE FOR ELDER CARE BEYOND HEALTH COVER

THE world's widest health cover recently got wider. The Union cabinet extended the Ayushman Bharat scheme to cover all senior citizens aged 70 and above. By the government's estimate, this would add about 6 crore beneficiaries to the 55 crore the scheme already covers. Seniors in families that are already covered would get a personal top-up of ₹5 lakh. It's a much-needed step in the world's most populous country that is ageing fast and where health cover among elders is abysmally low. The timing is crucial, too—while one in every 10 Indians in 2022 was aged above 60, the share is expected to double by 2050.

One of the major beneficiaries of the extension will be women. About 58 percent of Indians above 70 are women and an overwhelming majority of them are widowed. Facing restricted mobility and more societal isolation than the men of their age—conditions that are known to aggravate age-related disorders—women are in greater need of such support. Another valuable input should come from the scheme's digital mission that aims to collate longitudinal health data of those insured. This can be of immense help to the government in planning resources and researchers in understanding diseases better.

All these would be laudable outcomes, but they should be seen as part of a longer journey. The care elders need go far beyond being able to afford basic healthcare. The National Policy on Senior Citizens of 2011 addresses dignity and prevention measures, apart from finance and mobility concerns. We must ask how the state health systems, that can expect a surge in demand, are gearing up to face it. The 2011 policy suggested building a community care network, for which we can learn from innovations in Japan and the Netherlands, where academic credit is given to students who spend time with elders. The insistence on Aadhaar should be given a second look, given that it has already kept millions from accessing other welfare schemes. If we really want to care for our elders, we cannot treat this as just another rights-based scheme where the onus is on the citizen to navigate the stodgy government machinery to claim what is due. We must make access as easy as possible.

### QUICK TAKE

#### CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISM

ISRAELI airstrikes have killed at least 558 people including 50 children across Lebanon this week. Benjamin Netanyahu's claim it was a "pre-emptive strike" is euphemism that qualifies as a crime of aggression under international law. Former CIA director Leon Panetta has called the explosion of paggers and walkie-talkies in civilian areas "a form of terrorism". One of the most galling aspects of this cruel aggression is Israel's targeted killing of journalists—in Lebanon as in Gaza. Its attack on Reuters journalist Issam Abdullah last October also injured six others. This Monday, a missile struck Fadi Boudia's home while he was broadcasting. The issue needs to be highlighted at the ongoing UN General Assembly.

THE Indian Constitution has a built-in mismatch between revenue-raising and expenditure responsibilities, and has provided for the institution of a Union Finance Commission (UFC) to address this problem with quinquennial reviews.

Although it wasn't a constitutional body, the erstwhile Planning Commission had powers to allocate resources to states and enjoyed considerable political clout. The UFC's tasks were compromised. With the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014, the economy plunged into a market-mediated system, with its inherent bias towards regional imbalances and considerable changes in resource allocations.

The 16th Finance Commission is at a crossroads, particularly because its terms of reference (ToR) are not constrained by Article 280(3)(d) with 'any other matter in the interest of sound finance' and free from the burden of the pandemic. In this context, revisiting the design of the transfer system seems to be in order.

Restoring fiscal balance both vertical and horizontal to promote sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the critical constitutional goal of providing every citizen the minimum basic services of standard quality irrespective of their choice of residence is the key.

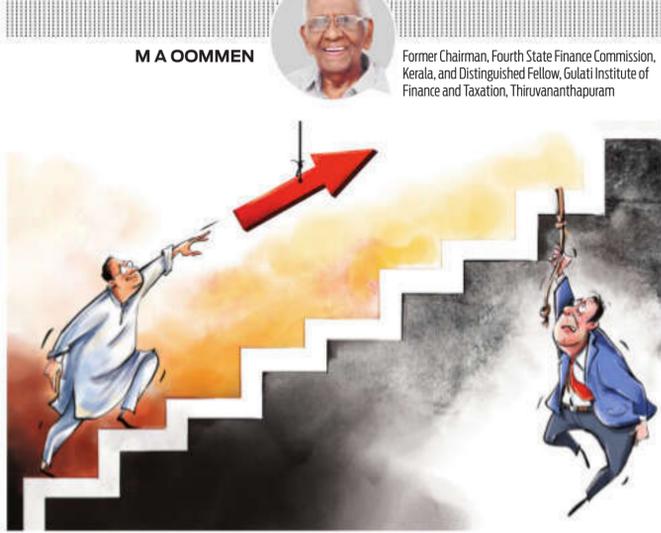
But inter-state disparities in per capita income and human development index (HDI) have widened since 1990. This makes the commission's task more onerous. It is in this context that I take up the question of rewards, performance and penalties as a strategic approach, with a focus on Kerala.

A well-designed transfer system to promote constitutional goals with appropriate rewards and penalties is needed in India, which has deep territorial inequity in the provisioning of minimum public services. Although the last five UFCs have used the strategy largely to serve the ToRs given to them, the disgusting narrative is that none of their ToRs sought to reward constitutional goals nor did they act keeping these fundamentals in view.

Look at the ToR of FC-15, which mentioned nine items to be rewarded, one of which was to "control or lack of it in incurring expenditure on populist measures". The items and their rewards and penalties leave many things to be desired. FC-11, the first since the 73rd/74th constitutional amendments, asserted: "Our overall scheme of resource transfers is characterised by pro-

States' performance on development goals mandated by the Constitution must be rewarded or penalised. The 16th Finance Commission can draw lessons from Kerala on this

## CARROTS & STICKS IN THE FINANCE COMMISSION'S HAND



M A OOMMEN

Former Chairman, Fourth State Finance Commission, Kerala, and Distinguished Fellow, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram

MANDAR PARDIKAR

viding a structure of incentives designed to reward fiscal prudence."

This pattern of 'incentivising and disincentivising' was continued in the recommendations of the 12th, 14th and 15th commissions. FC-13, which gave performance-based grants for reduction in infant mortality rate, improvement in the delivery of justice, etc. besides strongly promoting decentralisation reforms, stands out differently. Many UFCs seem to believe that the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act is a magic bullet to discipline states while the Union can pursue off-budget borrowings with impunity. To be sure, 'fiscal discipline' is more than expenditure pruning and is only a part of governance policy, particularly to facilitate the achievement

of constitutionally mandated goals or goals of national consequence like population policy and eradication of poverty.

The lack of an appropriate reward and punishment approach can adversely affect the fiscal prospects of a state, like Kerala, which achieved close to 100 percent literacy rate and has world-class records in other HDI components, topped millennium development goals, SDGs, rural-urban equity, a well-functioning public distribution system, enviable performance in decentralisation, and on female-male ratio compared to any European nation. As far back as 1987, I recall writing that the state will land in fiscal crises unless supported by maintenance grants.

Instructively, the Centre transferred

## THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ONE ELECTION PLAN RAISES

LET'S consider some of the logistical challenges that need to be overcome to hold simultaneous polls—the hugely consequential proposal accepted by the Union cabinet earlier this month. It would involve elections to 545 seats of the Lok Sabha, and 4,123 assembly seats of 28 states and nine Union territories. If you consider it as something way beyond a smooth undertaking, add to it some 31-lakh-odd panchayat seats, tens of thousands of seats for the 4,852 urban local bodies, and you know the size of the task at hand.

The 'One Nation, One Election' report is in its present form an impractical one and may harm federalism in the future in favour of a strong Centre. The implications are so big that, however reluctant it may be, the ruling alliance at the Centre will have to open channels for consultation with opposition parties to arrive at a consensus. Only then can this provision be passed by both Houses of parliament.

There are many other issues that the Rammath Kovind-led committee, which submitted its report on the simultaneous elections earlier this year, raises. One is the fall of the Union government in the event of a no-confidence motion. Elections will be held and the government will be in office only till the remainder of the term even if the ruling party has won a majority. Is this a feasible idea? What will be the enormous cost that will be accruing?

A major worry, although the opposition parties have not gone ballistic on this, is the impact on federalism. Simultaneous elections will result in the domination of national issues at the cost of local issues. Even if attempts are made to highlight local issues, they would get drowned in the cacophony of national topics. This may also put national parties at an advantage at the cost of regional ones.

The Kovind report has favoured a presidential notification that will contain an 'appointed date' for the simultaneous polls to start. This is likely to be 2029. While the present Lok Sabha will complete its five year term by then, all state assemblies will need to be dissolved.

Now, the Constitution says the people's mandate will be for five years unless the government falls through a no-confidence motion and the assembly gets dissolved. There will be 10 states including Karnataka, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan that will complete five years in



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2028. They will have to face people again within a year. As many as 17 states will have to go to polls within two, three or four years of their formation. They include Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala etc. If the objective of the whole Kovind exercise is mainly focused on containing expenditure, how does this help?



The nation deserves several answers before launching into an exercise as massive and consequential as simultaneous polls. For example, the Kovind Committee's report says the Election Commission has assured it can pull off this gargantuan exercise—but there is little clarity on logistical details or the costs

Another point: should monetary and logistical benefits that the report stresses override the federal structure and democratic ethos of the Indian constitution? There is an argument that frequent elections will help voters to regularly express their views on different issues. Their opinions are a reflection on how the government performed during its term. Synchronised polls will thwart this. Will the new proposal lead to reluctance on the part of opposition parties to move a no-confidence motion against the government?

There is no clarity on the number of amendments required. The Kovind committee says 18 amendments, including

15 constitutional ones, would be required to synchronise polls. However, it remains to be seen if the Centre reduces the number of constitutional amendments given the complexity in getting them passed. While simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies require parliamentary approval, holding local body polls within 100 days of the synchronised elections require consent from half of the state assemblies.

While the Lok Sabha and assembly polls will be the responsibility of the Election Commission of India, that of local bodies will be in the care of state election commissions. It would be another challenge for the NDA government to hammer out consensus in a fractured Lok Sabha.

Ensuring sufficient numbers of electronic voting machines would be a mammoth task. The committee says the ECI has assured that it can indeed hold simultaneous polls although there is no clarity on the number of electronic voting machines and polling booths required, the numbers of personnel needed, the kind of training required, the security forces required and their transfer from one place to another—all point to the enormous task lying ahead. Is India really up to it?

It would be interesting to see, if the proposal indeed gets the green signal, the number of phases the ECI would take to hold simultaneous polls. The latest effort needed seven phases to hold polls for the Lok Sabha and four state assemblies. Also, the ECI could not hold polls to even four states together in September-October 2024. It decided to conduct elections separately to Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana first, and Maharashtra and Jharkhand later.

Without getting into the merits of the Kovind committee report, it may be pointed out that the panel did not have wide representation in terms of regions. There was no nominee from southern, western or northeastern India, nor any woman on the team. This was much like the 15th Finance Commission, which had only male experts from the corridors of power in Delhi.

(Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Greeting Dissanayake

Ref: Patient dealing with Lanka called for as country turns left (Sep 24). India was quick to greet the new Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. Narendra Modi was timely in conveying felicitations. The new government's propensity for warmth with China need not put India on the back foot. **K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai**

#### Countering China

A resilient and emerging leadership begins with the maintenance of balance of power in the immediate neighbourhood. With Bangladesh and the Maldives cold-shouldering India, Sri Lanka would be an important destination to counter China's hegemony in the Indian Ocean region. **Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur**

#### Chess motivation

Ref: Indian chess's golden generation gets going (Sep 24). The triumph of Indian men and women in the chess Olympiad is an outstanding accomplishment. It displays the youth's mental acuity, intelligence and ability to develop strategies. More children will be the result of this great victory. **Naveen Madhu, Kozhikode**

#### J&K progress

Ref: Navigating the minefields of J&K elections (Sep 24). Conducting polls in Jammu & Kashmir is extremely difficult due to ongoing security concerns. The abrogation of Article 370 aimed to enhance integration and development. But for real progress, an elected government must take charge to bridge the gap between central policies and the region's unique challenges. **Narayanan Kizhumundayur, Thrissur**

#### Permanent seat

Ref: Modi's message of humanity in Summit of Future (Sep 24). PM Modi has rightly raised his voice for India's permanent seat in the UN Security Council. India is the largest democracy in the world and has played a great role in many peace missions. If we had a permanent seat, there is a chance the Russia-Ukraine war might have been subdued by now. **T Kaishav Ditya, Hyderabad**

#### Sex education

Ref: Sex education must to cut down crime, says SC (Sep 24). The Supreme Court's recent decision advocating for comprehensive sex education is a significant move towards reducing crime, particularly in combating child sexual exploitative and abuse material. By introducing sex education in schools and colleges, students will gain essential knowledge about consent, healthy relationships and the legal ramifications of sexual offenses. **Aman Giri, Bhubaneswar**

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{ OUR TAKE }

## SC joins battle to protect children

An expansive judgment on child pornography plugs legal loopholes, offers a curative framework to deal with the crime

The battle against sexual exploitation of children received a boost on Monday with the Supreme Court judgment that held that viewing in private, storing and possessing sexually explicit material involving minors, all constitute a crime under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Information Technology Act. The apex court's order, which overruled a Madras high court judgment that held mere possession or storage of "child pornography" was not an offence under the law, also took an expansive view of the issue and offered a curative framework to deal with it.

There are multiple takeaways from the judgment authored by Justice JB Pardiwala. One, the Court has said that the term "child pornography" is a misnomer and suggested that it be replaced by "child sexual exploitative and abuse material" or CSEAM. This change should remove any ambiguity about the heinous nature of the crime and frame it as an act of violence against children — pornography involving adults at times may be consensual, which does not constitute a crime unlike in the case of minors. In the Court's words, "Child sexual exploitation is one of the most heinous crimes imaginable, and the offence of child pornography is equally as heinous if not more, as in the latter the victimisation and exploitation of the child do not end with the initial act of abuse. It, in essence, turns the singular incident of abuse into a ripple of trauma-inducing acts where the rights and dignity of the child is continuously violated each time such material is viewed or shared". Two, the Court has spoken about "constructive possession" to bring the act of viewing child pornography without having physical possession of it (for instance, watching on streaming platforms on devices) under the ambit of law. The Court has held that parts of POCSO and IT Acts be interpreted accordingly to plug loopholes so that offenders do not take advantage of technology to circumvent legal barriers erected against the trading and consumption of CSEAM. Three, the Court recognises that weaponising the law alone is insufficient to deal with CSEAM crimes: The order speaks about the need for better societal understanding of the sexual exploitation of children, prescribes "positive sex education" for better awareness about these crimes, and calls for a compassionate approach towards the victims of violence.

The onus is now on the legislature and executive to implement the Court's vision. A larger conversation in society and administrative action — from appointing an expert panel to devise health and sex education programmes to raising awareness about POCSO — should help raise the bar against CSEAM crimes.

## Women's stories, as mainlined by cinema

*Laapataa Ladies* has been picked as India's official entry for the Oscars ahead of *All We Imagine as Light*, which won the Grand Prix at Cannes earlier this year. This decision has sparked a controversy, given that *All We Imagine as Light*, with a prestigious global award already under its belt, may have had a better chance to be nominated for the Academy Awards. Be that as it may, there is a larger message in how the debate has boiled down to two sensitively told stories — of women, made by women. *Laapataa Ladies* centres around two very young brides in the Hindi heartland dealing with a traumatic situation while staking all to keep their hopes alive. *All We Imagine as Light*, on the other hand, is a lambent exploration of female friendship and care through the lives of three nurses.

The two are part of a larger trend seen in Indian films that have women, especially from rural areas or at the peripheries of the "cosmopolitan" metros, as protagonists. These women question patriarchy in settings that mirror the dominant social and cultural mores of real life. Think Sandhya from *Pagglait*, Badru from *Darlings*, or Mahima from *Kathal*. Women-centric films, in the past, were mostly relegated to the fringes of mainstream cinema, if not pigeonholed as arthouse productions. *Laapataa Ladies*, *All We Imagine as Light* and the others in this league represent a welcome shift.

This shift perhaps reflects a churn at the grassroots where women are marking out their space, even in matters as fundamental as economic independence and political agency. That said, while we celebrate these films, the Indian cinema industry needs to stay in step by turning its gaze inwards in light of the Hema Committee report on Malayalam cinema.

## In Sri Lanka, a vote for change, political reform

Voter disillusionment with the traditional political elite is behind the rise of the NPP. But to build an inclusive Sri Lanka free from ethnic and religious tensions, president Dissanayake needs to gain the trust of Tamils and Muslims

Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the National People's Power (NPP), was sworn in as the new executive president of Sri Lanka on Monday at the Presidential Secretariat, a location deeply symbolic as the epicentre of the 2022 *Aragalaya* (struggle) protest movement, which played a key role in ousting former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Dissanayake, who had secured only 3% of the vote in the 2019 presidential election, made a historic leap to win 42% in the election held on September 21, marking one of the most significant surges in political popularity. This dramatic increase in support reflects the growing influence of the protest movement and the public's demand for change. Many credit the *Aragalaya* for playing a pivotal role in Dissanayake's rise, positioning him and the NPP as a viable alternative to the traditional political establishment.

The NPP is a coalition formed under the leadership of the Janatha

Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a leftist party that Dissanayake currently leads. The JVP, founded in 1965, has a history of attempting to seize power through armed insurrections in 1971 and 1988-89, both of which were met with brutal reprisals. Despite these setbacks, the party survived and rebranded itself in the early 1990s, re-entering the democratic process as a vocal opposition force.

While the JVP's presence in parliament has historically been minimal, it gained a reputation for exposing corruption and incompetence within the ruling elite. Its image as an uncorrupted political movement resonated with parts of the electorate, though it struggled to gain the widespread trust necessary to govern.

In recent years, however, the NPP — through coalition-building with civil society organisations — has transformed the JVP's image and broadened its appeal. Under Dissanayake's leadership, the once inward-looking JVP became a more dynamic organisation, welcoming a variety of social groups and views. For instance, the NPP became the first political party in Sri Lanka to include LGBTQ rights in its election manifesto. More importantly, the party's focus on anti-corruption, economic and social justice, and economic reform has resonated with voters disillusioned by decades of mismanagement under the two traditional parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Free-

dom Party (SLFP).

Since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, the political landscape has been dominated by the UNP and SLFP (recently, majority of UNP formed a new party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya led by Sajith Premadasa and the majority of the SLFP formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna led by Mahinda Rajapaksa), both of which were founded by members of the Sinhala elite. These parties built vast patronage networks, exchanging jobs, welfare, and resources for political loyalty. This patron-client system fostered political dependency, limiting the electorate's development of an issue-based political consciousness.

For decades, these networks allowed the UNP and SLFP to maintain their grip on power, despite growing dissatisfaction. Corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency were rampant, but voters often remained loyal to these parties due to the tangible benefits they received. Additionally, both the UNP and SLFP have historically used nationalism and religion as tools to consolidate power, often stoking Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to secure the majority's support and deepen divisions along ethnic and religious lines.

The *Aragalaya* movement in 2022 marked a significant departure from this traditional political culture. Fuelled by public outrage over the country's economic collapse and the perceived incompetence of the ruling elite, the movement captured the frustrations of a generation that felt



Kaushalya Kumarasinghe



Anura Kumara Dissanayake's victory, driven by public demand for an end to decades of misrule, marks a turning point for Sri Lanka

betrayed by the status quo. The success of the movement in ousting President Rajapaksa, and Dissanayake's subsequent rise, signals a shift in the political landscape, with voters increasingly demanding meaningful social change.

Dissanayake's victory, driven by public demand for an end to decades of misrule, marks a turning point for Sri Lanka. However, as the new executive president, Dissanayake faces the monumental challenge of governing a nation still mired in economic crisis. Some political commentators believe that the will and capability to lead Sri Lanka toward development by prioritising equitable economic policies and good governance; with a strong focus on modernising institutions and addressing the root causes of corruption and inefficiency, the NPP is well-positioned to drive reforms and foster long-term national growth.

The NPP's election manifesto also advocates for a more neutral and balanced foreign policy, allowing Sri Lanka to engage constructively with major powers while avoiding over-reliance on any single country. For India, a balanced Sri Lanka means a more stable neighbour that can help maintain regional peace and security.

The question now is whether Dissa-

nayake and the NPP can turn their promises of reform into tangible improvements for the people of Sri Lanka, or whether the forces of the old political order will regroup and resist the change. However, with the patronage networks dismantled and the traditional elite's political legitimacy weakened, it is unlikely they will be able to reorganise quickly.

Meanwhile, the NPP's growing popularity suggests it may form a relatively strong government after the upcoming parliamentary elections. Translating their policies into concrete social change will depend largely on their ability to secure a parliamentary majority. To build an inclusive Sri Lankan nation free from ethnic and religious tensions, as they have pledged in their manifesto, the NPP will need to gain the trust of northern and eastern Tamils, Muslims, and Malayaha (hill) Tamil communities. Although winning over these communities, who have experienced decades of broken promises from Sinhala-majority political parties, will be challenging, the NPP's political preparedness makes this a difficult but not impossible task.

Kaushalya Kumarasinghe is a Sinhala novelist and sociologist. The views expressed are personal

## Semiconductor deal with the US a big strategic boost

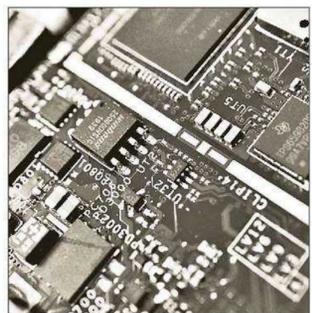
The chip and the ability to miniaturise computing power determined victory in the Cold War. Now, it will again establish the strategic haves and have-nots of the 21st century. Just as industrial-age arsenals made sure that you never ran out of ammunition, in the digital age you will need chip fabrication (fab) strength to make sure that you do not run out of chips. Ascendancy in every critical domain of modern, electronic warfighting rides on the sufficiency of quantity and quality of chips.

The salience of the meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and United States (US) President Joe Biden in Delaware last week, where the two leaders hailed a watershed arrangement to establish a new semiconductor fabrication plant in India that will be focused on advanced sensing, communications, and power electronics for national security, next-generation telecommunications and green energy applications, is to be read against this backdrop. The fab, which will be established with the objective of manufacturing infrared, gallium nitride and silicon carbide semiconductors, will be enabled by support from the Indian Semiconductor Mission as well as a strategic technology partnership between Bharat Semi, 3rdiTech, and the US Space Force.

The agreement will help to take India's nascent capacities in chips and micro-electronics not only towards self-sufficiency but also to a new, game-changing high.

As of 2024, global semiconductor sales stand at a staggering \$526.8 billion, while concurrently stimulating another \$7 trillion in global economic activity annually. These also underpin a range of downstream applications in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and big data. Also, since semiconductors power virtually every modern device, it means industries/enterprises with access to the most sophisticated semiconductors enjoy a significant advantage when it comes to the ability to manufacture the most innovative products.

In 2023, India's import of chips was pegged at \$110 billion. Rather unflatteringly, while 20% of the global semiconductor manpower is located in India, India has always been a back-end design and services hub; almost 100% of Indian talent works in the back offices of foreign companies. Currently, the entire Indian defence ecosystem relies on



Unflatteringly, while 20% of the global semiconductor manpower is located in India, India has always been a back-end design and services hub

imports. Bharat Electronics alone spends close to ₹1,800 crore every year on the import of semiconductors. The aggregate military-industrial complex in India spends over ₹8,000 crore on semiconductor imports. The new US-India fab arrangement, therefore, could be a turning point in converting our abject strategic dependencies into a historic opportunity for strategic autonomy.

A peep into the nuances of the arrangement points to the monumentality of the achievement. India's Bharat Semi and 3rdiTech (the latter is a product essentially of the ministry-of-defence-driven iDEX enterprise, and therefore a feather in its cap) have inked a collaboration with the US Space Force to build the first, Indo-US semiconductor fab with a focus on national security. This historic agreement will see the US military — the developers of niche capacities in semiconductors — provide the technological enablement for a commercial fab to be set up in India. This fab, in turn, will focus on critical facets of prowess in modern warfighting, such as advanced sensing, communications, and power electronics.

The calculus in fact goes beyond national security; it encompasses next-generation telecom infrastructure and the humongous challenge of the green energy transition. The ambitions run even deeper — to develop a framework of state-of-the-art semiconductor technologies that help lubricate partnerships like Quad, in the wider Indo-Pacific, possibly, even in the Global South, as a source of a secure, trusted, and resilient supply chain for friends and partners.

The very name of the company — Bharat Semi — is more than symbolic. Drawing from Article 1 of the Constitution of India, the aspiration is to build an Indian deep technology behemoth, albeit one with an international visage, a strategic asset that India could wield in the pursuit of its interests. It could also be the first step towards making India a defence powerhouse — if seven out of 20 most promising defence primes in the globe today, are Chinese, how about some Indian competition too?

What is of even greater significance perhaps is the fact that the infusion of start-ups, the private sector, and an entrepreneurial drive in Indian defence have begun to bear fruit. The iCET Initiative, signed by Modi and Biden in 2022, laid out a very clear vision of unleashing the private sector and start-ups in the two democracies, to uncover possibilities and forge partnerships in critical technologies. The agreement could be the beginning of a perfect storm in such collaborative endeavours. It may also be legacy building for both leaders — Modi for his audacious moves that have led to rare access to hitherto denied technologies and Biden for making good on his promises.

The signing of the agreement will go down in history as a symbol of the coming of age of Indian statecraft, in the debt accomplishment of an extraordinarily ambitious and game-changing deal. We might consider celebrating this day as Aatmanirbharta Diwas if only to take our aspirations in strategic military self-reliance to ever-higher vistas of achievement and delivery.

Lt. General (Retd) Raj Shukla is member, Union Public Service Commission. The views expressed are personal

{ MASOUD PEZESHKIAN } PRESIDENT OF IRAN



**Hezbollah cannot stand alone against a country that is being defended, supported and supplied by western countries, by European countries, and the US**

## Driving EV climate gains needs rethink on charging

India has made major strides in battery-powered electric vehicles (EVs) over the past five years or so. From a 0.6% share in vehicle sales in 2018-19, EV sales (excluding buses) now account for 7.2%. We are now steadily closer to the double-digit mark. As per projections by other organisations, such as the International Energy Agency, the future looks bright too. Should we, therefore, be confident about achieving significant greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction from transport? A major policy objective of transitioning to electric mobility is to decarbonise road transport that contributes to about 12% of India's energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. And as in all complex problems, the devil is in the details.

The benefit to climate by EVs in India is conditional. Prima facie, the absence of tail-pipe emissions in EVs means reduction in direct vehicular carbon dioxide emissions. However, switching to EVs leads to shifting the energy source to a fleet of power plants. The greenness of power supply varies by country. In India's case, fossil fuels meet as much as three-fourth of the country's electricity requirement. Therefore, whether EVs can decarbonise India's motorised road transport should be properly qualified.

Relying on simplified methodologies can misrepresent the true climate impact of electric mobility. The share of renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, in India's power supply mix varies significantly throughout the day, influencing emissions associated with EV charging at different times. Current approaches also ignore the variability in EV charging patterns. Factors like vehicle use-case, travel characteristics, and availability of charging infrastructure influence when and where EVs are charged. Owing to the varying charging pattern, EVs may avoid GHG emissions significantly and deliver limited climate dividends or consume even more carbon space depending on their charging alignment with periods of high renewable energy availability. Current comparisons between select EV and conventional vehicle models fail to capture the diversity of vehicle energy performance within and across vehicle segments. This can lead to misleading generalisations about the overall impact of EV adoption.

The inherent energy efficiency advantage of electric drivetrain over internal combustion engine across two-wheeled and three-wheeled vehicles, passenger cars, and buses is well established. However, the emissions advantage of EVs diminishes when factoring in the annual average carbon burden of India's grid electricity. That the majority charges EVs during evening or

overnight, thereby increasing reliance on coal-based power and limiting any emission gains, is an eye-opener.

In the present scenario, charging during the day can potentially avoid nearly 10% extra emissions than during the evening, which is significant at a sector level. As the grid electricity mix becomes more solar dominated, the time-of-day emissions profile of EVs will get skewed further. Therefore, ensuring climate gains from EVs needs serious thinking.

This calls for coordinated action from policymakers, industry stakeholders, and consumers. First, by aligning EV charging with greener hours through time-of-day electricity tariffs (pricing electricity at lower rates during periods of high renewable energy supply to incentivise EV charging) tailored for regional contexts. Furthermore, providing access to public charging in sync with travel patterns and mainstreaming

battery swapping as a charging solution (that gives the flexibility to charge EV batteries during daytime without requiring the EVs to be parked for that period). Second, nudging production and marketing of more efficient EV models by making energy labelling mandatory for traction battery packs and systems. Moreover, setting more stringent emission targets under future Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) enforcement cycles with expanded scope (currently applicable to passenger cars only). Last, coupling EV charging infrastructure with distributed renewable energy resources like solar photovoltaic panels through innovative renewable-energy-as-a-service mechanisms that enable procurement of renewable energy from off-site locations. One does not have to face practical difficulties (like limited space for installation and impact of shading) in generating solar energy on-site. End-of-life batteries can be an affordable and sustainable energy storage solution at charging stations for storing energy from renewable energy resources and delivering this clean electricity to charge EVs during evening and night-time.

By adopting this three-pronged strategy, India can harness the potential of EV transition to curb transportation emissions and drive its mobility to a sustainable future. Not to forget, the government has offered quite significant explicit and implicit fiscal incentives through subsidies and preferential tax-treatments to promote EV adoption. It is in the national interest to make these supports count.

Shyamasis Das is fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal



MOHAMMAD MUSTAFA  
Palestine Prime Minister

“ Our people in Gaza are enduring one of the darkest chapters in modern history. Israel’s genocidal war has caused unprecedented loss and humanitarian catastrophe



MERYL STREEP  
Hollywood actor

A female cat has more freedoms than a woman in Afghanistan. A cat may go sit on her front stoop and feel the sun on her face.... A squirrel has more rights than a girl in Afghanistan



MAMATA BANERJEE  
West Bengal Chief Minister

What is happening with the Railways? Even today, there is news of derailment. The Railways has created a world record in derailments. But nobody says anything”

## India, the peacemaker

India has the required diplomatic heft to play the role of a peacemaker in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. This was amply demonstrated during the engagements Prime Minister Narendra Modi had with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the recent meeting with United States President Joe Biden — all focused on finding a lasting and peaceful resolution to the vexed conflict. Refusing to be caught in a binary choice, India has taken a pragmatic approach throughout the conflict and has been consistently rooting for a negotiated settlement of all disputes and immediate cessation of hostilities. There has been a growing international expectation that India take a more proactive role in global peace efforts, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war. India is one of the few countries that is engaging both sides of the geopolitical schism over Ukraine — the West as well as the Eurasian leadership. New Delhi’s long-held positions on non-alignment and strategic autonomy, which the NDA government has largely carried forward during the war with its abstention votes at the United Nations and refusal to accept western sanctions, help its image as an unbiased and honest mediator. Besides, it is an important voice for the Global South and recently ensured that its G-20 presidency focused on issues like energy and food security that matter to the developing world rather than the war itself. As a result, the increase in India’s intake of Russian oil, leading to a six-fold increase in bilateral trade, has been projected as an assertion of its principles rather than profiteering.

India’s balanced approach to international diplomacy positions it as a key player in Russia-Ukraine peace efforts

India’s approach to the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been guided by its commitment to peace and dialogue, and its outreach has been multifaceted. Modi’s call for peace has been consistent throughout the conflict. In September 2022, during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit in Uzbekistan, Modi told Putin that the era of wars was over and underscored the importance of dialogue and diplomacy in resolving the crisis. A year later, during his visit to Moscow, he again spoke about the urgent need for peace negotiations, asserting that a solution to the Ukraine conflict was not possible on the battlefield, and that peace talks do not succeed amid bombs, guns and bullets. He also expressed New Delhi’s willingness to support peace efforts in all possible ways. During his recent visit to Kyiv where he met Zelenskyy, it was made clear that India was willing to play an active role in promoting peace. India’s balanced approach to international diplomacy, with open lines of communication with both Russia and Ukraine, positions it as a key player in potential peace efforts. With the BRICS summit scheduled in Russia’s Kazan next month, India is expected to remain at the forefront of diplomatic efforts to mediate peace. National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval’s recent meeting with Putin reflects the trust both sides place in India’s diplomatic role.

# Tragedy of the Commons

Measures for the promotion of fisheries sector are in the right direction but the problem of overfishing persists



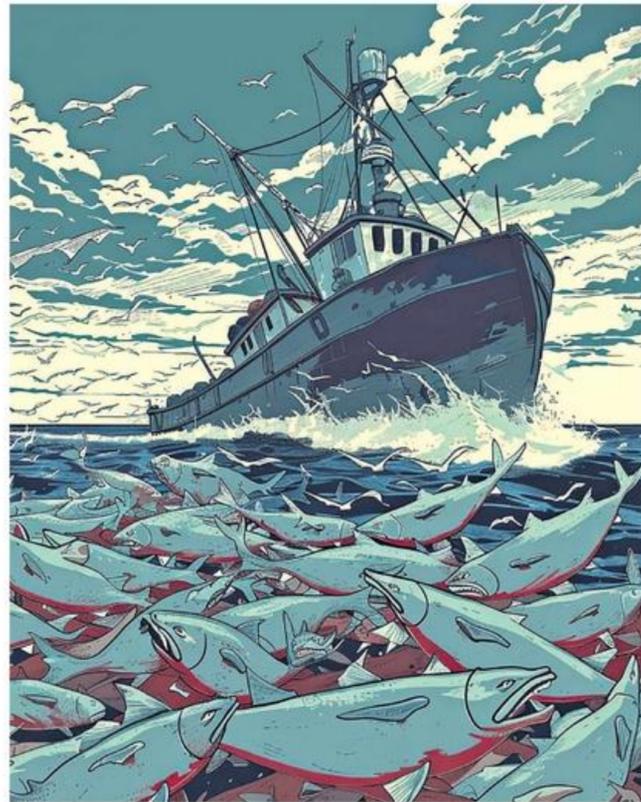
Dr. AISHWARYA HARICHANDAN

KANHAIYA KUMAR

The fisheries sector, considered the sunrise industry of the Indian economy, recorded the highest average decadal growth of 8.9% (FY 2014-23) among allied sectors under agriculture. With a record-high fish production of 174.45 lakh tonnes in 2023-24, India is the world’s second-largest fish-producing nation, accounting for around 8% of the global fish production. This sector employs 30 million people. Under the motto ‘Reform-Perform-Transform,’ the government aims to further develop the sector as a crucial means of achieving Viksit Bharat by 2047. Taking this as the context, it is important to identify the threats that this sector faces. One of the serious threats that it encounters is that of overfishing. According to a study by the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute in 2022, of the total fish stock in India, 4.4% is subject to overfishing, 8.2% is overfished and 0.7% is rebuilding.

**Overfishing** Fisheries are self-renewable in nature. Unlike mineral resources, if the marine resources are well managed, their duration is practically unlimited. However, fisheries are susceptible to the tragedy of the commons. This means that everyone in a bid to maximise their utility tends to overuse the common property resource, thereby leading to its exhaustion or degradation. This phenomenon is best explained by the statement “freedom in a common brings ruin to all.” With respect to fisheries, the tragedy of the commons leads to overfishing. It is necessary to look at how the problem of overfishing can be addressed.

Conventionally, the management of fisheries is done through top-down approaches where the power to make rules is concentrated in the hands of



the government. This includes creation of marine reserves, control over times of access, norms of distribution of harvest and restriction on catch. However, all this leads to a “race to fish.” Due to control over the time of access and since the supply is constrained, there is an over-investment in fishing vessels. The fishermen try to catch as much as possible during the limited time, leading to the supply being more than the demand.

As a result, there is excess fish in the market which requires adequate processing for it to be sold throughout the year. This leads to high processing costs due to the perishable nature of the harvest and deterioration in the product quality.

**Addressing the Problem** The conventional management techniques have not been very successful, neither could they conserve the fish stocks nor generate the highest rate of return. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative to look at alternative methods like community-driven and rights-based approaches.

**Community-driven Approach** Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom advocated for participatory bottom-up approaches for the management of the commons.

She showed that when natural resources are jointly owned, rules are established for their use in a way that is both economically and ecologically sustainable.

Several fishing communities in India have demonstrated this. For instance, the Ashtamudi Clam Fishery in Kerala faced severe overfishing in the early 1990s, causing the annual catch to drop from 10,000 tonnes to half that amount within two years. In response, local fishers, guided by scientists, implemented sustainable practices: closing the fishery during the peak breeding season, setting a minimum size limit for harvestable clams and banning mechanical fishing. As a result, catches have stabilised at around 10,000 tonnes. In 2014, the Ashtamudi fishery became India’s first to receive the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification.

The importance of fisheries is evident from the fact that SDG 14 specifically talks about conserving and sustainably using the oceans, marine resources

boosting market prospects in Europe and the US.

**Rights-based Approach** The broad application of the rights-based management regimes is based on property rights and “limited access privileges” in the ocean, which can provide incentives to resource owners to protect marine resources rather than destroy them. Though only a small fragment of world fisheries has administered the property rights regime till now, it has been triumphant wherever adopted. Its application has led to elevated fishery profits due to the elimination of unnecessary effort in terms of overinvestment in fishing vessels and the elimination of processing costs. It has also ensured a fresh supply of catch in the market year-round, resulting in improved product quality.

The most notable property rights approach is “individual catch share” such as Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs), Individual Vessel Quotas (IVQs) and Individual Fishing Quotas (IFQs), depending on the way they are administered. The regimes are competitive and efficient, where the catch share is tradable. Under IFQs, each quota holder is allowed to catch a specified percentage of the TAC (total allowable catch) that is set by fishery managers each season. These IFQs are transferable such that the quota holders can adjust the size of their fishing operations by buying and selling quotas.

The marine environment also extensively benefits when there is a shift from traditional management to a property rights approach. Firstly, it reduces by-catch, which is a major concern. Secondly, catch share regimes also address issues such as seafloor degradation, coral destruction and other damages caused due to bottom trawling, dredging and trapping. For instance, the Alaska Halibut fishery, where the IFQs led to the above results.

**Sustainable Development** The importance of fisheries is evident from the fact that SDG 14 specifically talks about conserving and using the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

Conventional ways of addressing the problem of overfishing have not been very successful. Effective measures include the rights-based and community-based approaches, including investing in natural resources. All these require effective monitoring. In India’s case, the measures for the promotion of the fisheries sector are in the right direction, however, all the stakeholders should also be alert to the problem of overfishing.

(Dr. Aishwarya Harichandan is Assistant Professor of Economics and Business Environment at IIM Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh. Kanhaiya Kumar is Indian Forest Service probationer at Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy, Dehradun. Views are personal)

### Letters to the Editor

#### World at war

Several parts of the world are in a state of war. The Russia-Ukraine war is already on, with more arms and ammunition being sent to Ukraine by the West. Israel is fighting on several fronts in the Middle East. According to reports, the United States is also sending additional troops to the Middle East in the wake of a sharp increase in the violence between Israel and Lebanon. Where are we headed? There are fears of the world getting engulfed in a Third World War. The United Nations seems to have become a mute spectator. All we can say is, “give peace a chance!”

MELVILLE X D’SOUZA, Mumbai

#### Well-researched

The Rewind on ‘Rendezvous with Rhinos’ (Sept 22) was well-researched and covered every aspect of this magnificent animal. I was not aware that rhinos were successfully relocated to Dudhwa and Manas sanctuaries. I am also curious to know about the fate of Kuno cheetahs. Are they surviving and what is their future? Thanks for this beautiful article.

BISWAJIT BASU

#### Wasteful exercise

The main reason adduced by the BJP government to introduce ‘one nation, one election’ is that it would reduce the cost of multiple elections. However, it holds no water. Further, if this mode of election has to be implemented, multiple amendments to the Constitution will have to be made which is improbable, as the ruling saffron alliance lacks the required two-thirds majority in both the Houses. The recommendation of the Kovind panel has not come as a surprise to many.

THARCUS S FERNANDO, Chennai

#### Gentle giants

Many thanks to N Shiva Kumar for highlighting the endangered species. Rhinos are gentle giants. Apart from poaching, floods are a major problem threatening the survival of the species. However, people have become alert and any news of killing rhinos gets wide publicity in newspapers and TV channels.

DILIP KUMAR BORAH, Guwahati

#### Education must

Not only adults, but teenagers are also addicted to child porn content. Such heinous acts leave a long-lasting emotional and mental trauma on children who are victims. Apart from making child porn an offence, awareness is a must for children. The government should make efforts to educate students in schools about good/bad touch, proactive measures and defence techniques.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, Mohali

#### Crucial moment for Sri Lanka

With a country seeking to emerge from the economic collapse, the Sri Lanka election serves as a crucial moment for shaping the nation’s recovery and restoring both domestic and international confidence in its governance. Anura Kumara Dissanayake’s anti-corruption message and his promise of a change in political culture resonated strongly with young voters. Tax hikes and welfare cuts by the previous government as part of austerity measures aimed at steering the country’s economy back on track did not work out well. Dissanayake’s accession to the present office is a remarkable turnaround. He is Sri Lanka’s first Marxist party leader to become the President of the island nation.

P VICTOR SELVARAJ, Palayamkottai

### India in the hotspot

■ Dhaka Tribune

#### Bangladesh and India: No room for bad blood

“Bangladesh-India” must surely be among the most misrepresented bilateral relationships in the region... The need to rewire the relationship ranges from Bangladesh bargaining harder for trade and transshipment quid pro quos, to ensuring equity in river water sharing.

■ Al Jazeera

#### Is Indus Waters Treaty the latest flashpoint?

For more than 60 years, India and Pakistan have jointly managed the waters of six rivers of the Indus basin that gave birth to one of the oldest human civilisations. Despite four wars and near-constant tension between them, they used the Indus Waters Treaty to irrigate the fertile lands.

■ CNN

#### US to return a trove of nearly 300 antiquities

The US is returning 297 history-spanning antiquities stolen or smuggled from India, many dating back centuries. Marking the handover, President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi posed for a photo in front of several of the artifacts, during a recent meeting.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

# The Statesman

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## Chip Push

India's semiconductor push, spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at meetings with American tech leaders, marks a pivotal moment in the country's efforts to cement its position as a key player in the global supply chain. This strategic pivot not only seeks to reduce dependence on China but also aims to build long-term resilience in sectors critical to modern technology and national security. The meeting, attended by high-profile CEOs from companies like Google, Adobe and NVIDIA, reflects the growing confidence in India as a potential hub for innovation, co-development, and manufacturing. However, achieving this ambitious goal will require India to overcome significant challenges and build a robust semiconductor ecosystem. India's aspirations in the semiconductor sector have been long-standing, but previous attempts at fostering a home-grown chip manufacturing industry have faltered. The complexities involved in chip fabrication, which require cutting-edge technology, substantial financial investments, and highly specialised talent, have posed hurdles. However, the latest India-US semiconductor pact signals a renewed opportunity for India to finally make its mark. By focusing on producing chips for defence and next-generation technologies, this deal underscores India's strategic importance, particularly in the context of growing tensions between the US and China. As global power dynamics shift, India stands to benefit from its positioning as a trusted partner for the US and its allies.

One of the key factors driving this shift is the diversification of supply chains. The Covid-19 pandemic and rising geopolitical tensions with China have exposed the vulnerabilities of a heavily concentrated global semiconductor supply chain. As the world's second-largest manufacturer of semiconductors, China's dominance in this sector has raised concerns, especially for countries like the US, which view semiconductors as vital not only for consumer technology but also for national security. This is where India comes in – as a democratic nation with a growing manufacturing base, India offers an alternative to firms seeking to reduce their reliance on China. However, while the semiconductor pact is a promising step, it remains to be seen whether India can deliver on its potential. Building a semiconductor industry from scratch will require long-term investments in infrastructure, talent development, and research and development. Additionally, India must navigate the highly competitive nature of the global semiconductor market, where established players like Taiwan, South Korea, and China are far ahead in terms of capacity and technological sophistication. At the same time, India's outreach to top tech leaders and its engagement with the Indian diaspora demonstrate the country's soft power and its ability to leverage global networks for economic and strategic gain. Ultimately, India's semiconductor ambitions are intertwined with its broader goals of becoming a global manufacturing hub and enhancing its strategic partnerships. While the road ahead is challenging, the growing alignment between India and the US, coupled with the shifting geopolitical landscape, provides India with a unique opportunity to assert itself as a key player in the global tech ecosystem.

## Myanmar Shift

India's diplomatic approach toward the Myanmar conflict is undergoing a subtle yet potentially transformative shift. By extending an invitation to political and military opponents of Myanmar's junta for a seminar in New Delhi, India signals a recalibration of its stance. This marks a significant moment in India's Myanmar policy, reflecting both geopolitical concerns and internal security interests. The seminar, which reportedly includes representatives from Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) and ethnic rebel groups, such as those from Chin, Rakhine, and Kachin, represents India's first formal engagement with the anti-junta forces. Given that Myanmar has been embroiled in a civil conflict since the military's 2021 coup, India's gesture is both timely and pragmatic. The situation along their shared 1,650-kilometre border has become increasingly volatile, with rebel forces seizing significant swathes of territory from the military. This growing instability directly threatens India's north-eastern region, as well as its infrastructure projects in Myanmar. What stands out in India's move is its delicate balancing act. For years, India has maintained relations with Myanmar's junta, even as Western nations imposed sanctions and condemned the regime. By not severing ties, India avoided alienating Myanmar's military, which could have driven the regime closer to China – a rival that already wields significant influence in Myanmar. At the same time, India refrained from openly criticising the junta, preferring to pursue a more neutral stance that protected its own strategic interests.

Yet, the civil war in Myanmar has escalated to a point where border instability is no longer a distant concern but an immediate threat. India's investment in infrastructure projects like the Kaladan port and road projects, designed to boost connectivity between its north-eastern states and Southeast Asia, could be severely undermined by the conflict. The economic and security implications of an unstable border have likely prompted India to take a more proactive approach in addressing the internal dynamics of Myanmar. Engaging with the NUG and ethnic rebel groups signals India's intent to be seen as a mediator in Myanmar's protracted conflict. While ASEAN's peace efforts have faltered, with little progress since the 2021 unveiling of its five-point consensus, India's willingness to engage with "all stakeholders" could fill a crucial void.

However, the exact objectives of this engagement remain unclear. Is India attempting to pressure the junta into adopting a more conciliatory approach? Or is this a strategic hedge, signalling that New Delhi is prepared to work with alternative powers within Myanmar should the junta's grip on power continue to weaken? Regardless of the intent, this shift opens a new chapter in India-Myanmar relations. By inviting Myanmar's anti-junta forces, India not only safeguards its own security and economic interests but also positions itself as a key player in shaping Myanmar's future. Whether this leads to substantive change remains to be seen, but the invitation is a bold step that underscores India's growing regional influence.

# Jayadeva's Genius ~ I

**It is a tragedy, rather a civilizational fault, that unlike the Greeks, ancient India did not bother to create formal schools, institutions and academies to bear the torch of this magnificent civilization and relied solely on the fragile Ashram and family-based teaching system, thus losing many treasures and real history. Our great poets and geniuses including Jayadeva were victims of this neglect**

Jayadeva (c1170 ~ c1245 CE), the 12th century legendary Sanskrit poet, has been one of the greatest classical poets and singers of India. Like Kalidasa, his life is also shrouded in mystery and few authentic accounts are available about his life and work. Controversies about his ancestry and place of birth keep these details in the realm of speculation. Owing to the self-effacement philosophy of ancient India's rishis, poets, singers, literary and scientific geniuses and unfortunate neglect of historiography, writing of biography and autobiography, Jayadeva's life history went into oblivion and was sought to be reconstructed from bits of information available at various places and interpretation of sundry events.

It is a tragedy, rather a civilizational fault, that unlike the Greeks, ancient India did not bother to create formal schools, institutions and academies to bear the torch of this magnificent civilization and relied solely on the fragile Ashram and family-based teaching system, thus losing many treasures and real history. Our great poets and geniuses including Jayadeva were victims of this neglect.

Controversies about Jayadeva's place of birth and his sphere of literary and music activities have not died down even today, though slightly muted owing to new research by a number of historians and scholars, and recent discoveries of stone inscriptions and archeological remains.

Three regions – Mithila, Bengal and Odisha – have claimed ownership of Jayadeva as son of their soil. Considerable confusion arose because of two reasons – existence of at least three poets and writers having the same name and the existence of three villages in three States named Kendu Bilwa, the supposed birthplace of Jayadeva.

The only biographical work appreciating Jayadeva's genius, life and work I could come across, was the eminent linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji's seminal work *Makers of Indian Literature ~ Jayadeva* (Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1973). According to Chatterji, "Jayadeva, the author of the *Gita-Govinda* is pre-eminent among Sanskrit poets and is acknowledged universally to be the writer of the sweetest lyrics in the Sanskrit language. His name comes spontaneously at the end as the last poet in an enumeration of the classic poets of Sanskrit – Asvaghosa, Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhartṛhari, Harsadeva, Bharavi, Bhavabhuti, Magha, Ksemendra, Somadeva, Bilhana, Sriharsa, Jayadeva. He is in fact the last of the classical poets of Sanskrit of pan-Indian celebrity, whose influence on the later poets and scholars all over India through his single work, the *Gita-Govinda*, is almost comparable to that of the great Kalidasa himself." Chatterji adds, "He thus stands at the yuga-sandhi, a confluence of two epochs, with a guiding hand for the new epoch that was coming. Jayadeva can truly be called the Last of the Ancients and the First of the Moderns in Indian Poetry".

Apart from his exquisite interpretations with English translations of the astapadis and the songs contained in various chapters, Chatterji has, in this monograph, analysed at great length the controversy and the competing



claims surrounding Jayadeva's birthplace and the places of his sojourn and activities.

Although he has refrained from giving a final verdict with conclusive proof, his inclination to accept the Bengali narrative is not supported by historical evidence and has been disputed by many modern historians of Bengal and Odisha. Chatterji's book kept the controversy alive.

Mithila's claim rested on two conjectures – (a) Jayadeva was a Kanyakubja brahmin and since the Kanyakubja brahmins hailed from Kannauj and Mithila, he must have been born in Mithila and (b) there exists a village named Kenduli near Jhanjharpur in Mithila (now in Bihar). Mithila's feeble claim is, however, not supported by any historical or archeological evidence.

While Bengali made a strong case for appropriating poet Jayadeva, it must be remembered that Jayadeva of *Gita Govinda* had never captured the Bengali consciousness until the advent of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who spearheaded the Bhakti Movement in the eastern part of the sub-continent creating a Vaishnava cult with thousands of followers. It is one of his Vaishnav followers, Banamali Das who wrote a book *Jayadeva Charita* in 1803, which was disseminated by Bengali historians. In an article published in the *Asiatic Society of Bengal*, M M Chakraborty has mentioned that Kenduli village in Birbhum district where a *Baul mela* is held every year was the birthplace of poet Jayadeva.

Moreover, the fact that another village adjacent to Kenduli was christened as Jaydev Kenduli and the annual *Baul* festival was renamed as 'Jayadeva mela', which became a place of tourist attraction, proves Jayadeva's connection with Kenduli. In *Gita Govinda*, however, Jayadeva mentions his birthplace as "Kendubilva by the sea" ("Kendubilva Samudra Sambhava") in his 7th Ashtapadi, and Birbhum, unlike Puri, doesn't have any sea around!

*ures of Bengal* which mentions Jayadeva as Jaydev Goswami, a typical Bengali Vaishnav name.

However, forgetting the controversy, from a larger geo-political perspective, Bengal's claim could be considered vindicated in the context that United Bengal during that period comprised large parts of Mithila (Bihar) and Odisha.

Incorporation of *Gita Govinda* in the rituals of Jagannath Mandir, live performances by his music and dance choir and practice of his own brand of Vaishnavism (Krishna consciousness) at the temple brought a cultural revolution in Puri, which soon spread to various parts of Odisha.

It is Jayadeva who made the Puri Jagannath temple the nerve-centre of Odissi art, culture and literature. In fact, the elegant Odissi dance form and the sonorous Odissi music owe their origin to Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and had evolved with his live performances along with his dancer wife at the Jagannath Temple.

Discovery of an ancient stone idol of Jayadeva at Akhandaleswara temple, Prataparudrapura, inscriptions at the Lingaraja temple and more recently discovered Madhukeswara and Simhachala temples shed new light on Jayadeva's early life. Inscriptions like "Sadhupradhana Jayadeva" carved by the contemporary Odisha king on the Lingaraja temple, Bhubaneswar say that Jayadeva had been a member of the teaching faculty of the school at Srikumapataka. Inscriptions found in Akhandaleswara, Madhukeswara and Simhachala temples establish a linkage of Kurmapataka with Jayadeva's career.

Relentless research by Odisha scholars and historians in recent years has unearthed new evidences which were hitherto unknown in Odisha. Discovery of *Gita Govinda* hand written in archaic Odia script on *talpatra* (palm leaves) by the medieval Odissi musician-poet, Gopalkrusna Patanayaka, a few poems of Jayadeva hand written in old Odissi language, and the mention of Sasanbilva (Sasan by the seaside) do indicate Jayadeva's close association with Odisha although his influence spread to Bengal, Andhra, Maharashtra and Kerala, especially in the dance forms of Kuchipudi, Bharatnatyam and Kathakali.

In Vaishnava Lilamruta, Madhaba Patnaik who lived in the sixteenth century clearly mentions that Jayadeva was born near Puri. Poets and writers in Assam, Andhra and Maharashtra have identified Jayadeva with Puri. A pioneer of the Bhakti movement, Guru Nanak Dev visited Puri and was so impressed with the songs of *Gita Govinda* that he included two hymns of *Gita Govinda* (in mixed Sanskrit and eastern Apabhramsa) in his *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Another fascinating saint of the Bhakti movement, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, during his sojourn from Nabadwip to Jagannath temple three centuries later, did not forget to go to Kenduli Sasan to pay respect to Jayadeva at his birthplace. Sri Chaitanya had been an ardent admirer of Jayadeva, who had been the originator of the Krishna-Radhakata and the divine love songs became Mahaprabhu's signature music during his Bhakti movement.

(To Be Concluded)



**PARIMAL BRAHMA**  
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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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## Japan's challenge

SIR, Apropos the two-part article 'Japan's Time Bomb', as a nation Japan has shown remarkable resilience in recovering from the effects of the second World War, which included the devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki to become the world's fourth largest economy. Japan has people with extraordinary



longevity. It is reported that there are more than 95,000 citizens who are more than 100 years old.

A less than optimum replacement population is bound to create deficiencies. One way of bridging the difference would be to encourage migrants. But the government of Japan has so far resisted all attempts to walk this road. More older people with less than necessary younger ones means a greater burden on them. Economically, Japan is no longer the force it once was even if it has granted India a tax free loan for the bullet train project.

Let this be a lesson to us that the one child norm can turn to be counterproductive in the long run. China is now encouraging couples to have more children by offering

incentives. A long life is sought by almost everybody. But it also entails getting old!

Yours, etc.,  
Anthony Henriques,  
Mumbai, 21 September.

### THE LADDU

SIR, I had the pleasure of visiting Sri Venkateswara temple in Tirumala five decades ago. The laddu we were able to get in the temple at that time was not only bigger in size but also much tastier compared to the ones we receive nowadays from our neighbours and friends who visit the temple.

Even the dedicated devotees say that the commercialisation that entered TTD a long time ago is the main reason not only for the deterioration in the quality of laddus given as prasadam, but also in various other services rendered by the

### LACK LEADERS

SIR, Doctors, scientists, artists and teachers are truthful to their work. They work silently in their fields. To them time is so precious. When the environment becomes polluted, they break their silence. They come down to the street and protest. They show the broken skeleton of the system. As a result, they spend their valuable time.

It is the basic responsibility of our authorities to provide safety, security and a suitable environment to our doctors and all professionals. If doctors are tortured, teachers are disturbed and artists are interrupted, how do they perform at their best?

Political persons are elected as drivers by the people. But only farsighted, broad-minded political leaders can steer the situation in the right direction. Unfortunately the nation lacks such leaders.

Yours, etc., Uttam Bhowmik, Tamluk, 23 September.

Trust which is said to be one of the richest religious entities in the world. As such the present controversy of adulteration in the ghee used by the TTD may not be a recent phenomenon but decades old. One feels that the other

ingredients like flour, raisins, cashew, nuts and spices used for making laddus may be of sub-standard quality.

Yours, etc.,  
Tharcus S. Fernando,  
Chennai, 24 September.

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

## Protecting our children

The arrest of alleged child sex trafficker Teddy Jay Mojeca Mejia in Dubai is a positive development for a country considered a hot-spot for online sexual abuse and exploitation of children (OSAEC). Mejia, who was repatriated from Dubai last week, is accused of abusing and exploiting 111 female minors by making them pose naked or recording them while being raped. He would then sell these materials online. Mejia's victims were aged between 9 and 15 years old.

However, there are still many abusers and offenders who are out there and continue to commit crimes against vulnerable children. It is tragic that many of them are even known to or are family members of the victims.

President Marcos himself said it was shameful that the Philippines had a disgraceful record for child sex abuse. This ignominy, he said, should not be allowed to continue especially in a country that is known for putting premium on family values. "It is an appalling statistic ... I cannot help but think how many are still left out there?"

The International Justice Mission (IJM) and the University of Nottingham Rights Lab said, based on 2022 data, that nearly one in every 100 children in the Philippines "were trafficked to produce child sexual exploitation material for profit." There were 22,421 children who experienced abuse, neglect and other types of violence in the Philippines for the first half of this year, per the Department of the Interior and Local Government. The government rescued 169 vic-

tims, and arrested 51 suspects from January to September.

Last year, there were 2,740,905 reports of suspected child sexual exploitation online in the Philippines, based on data from the United States National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Given the overwhelming number of cases, and despite the passage of Republic Act. No. 11930 that penalizes online abuse and exploitation of children, it is unlikely that they have all been acted upon. This means that offenders continue to exploit vulnerable children.

United Nations Special Rapporteur Mama Fatima Singhateh said during a visit to the country in 2022 that there is a lack of a dependable data collection. "It is essential to systematically collect reliable, centralized, and disaggregated data by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, including the number of prosecution and convictions related to child sexual abuse cases." Aside from data collection, it is also essential to train those who are tasked to receive, investigate, and adjudicate perpetrators of OSAEC. Singhateh noted that trained individuals should be available at the barangay level, which is the first resort for majority of the victims.

Interior Secretary Benhur Abalos Jr. has already called on local governments to pass ordinances addressing the rise of child abuse cases. There is also the Makabata helpline 1383 which the public can use in reporting cases – but how many are aware that there is such a hotline? The government doesn't need to replicate the success of Bantay Bata 163, a social welfare program of the ABS-CBN Foundation that aims to protect disadvantaged and at-risk children, but it should use this program as a benchmark for launching and providing an effective public service.

The government should also consider Singhateh's suggestion to establish a child-specific court separate from family courts to immediately address these cases and minimize trauma for the victims. It may also want to revisit the earlier suggestions made by the IJM to accelerate response to OSAEC including strictly enforcing RA 11934 or the SIM Registration Act to "detect, block, and report child sexual exploitation materials, including livestreamed abuse." When the law was first passed, the government had so much enthusiasm over what it can do in going after nefarious individuals but online crimes – from sexual exploitation to financial scams – continue to proliferate.

# JVP's victory is a setback for India

SANTOSH MATHEW

In a seismic shift that could reshape South Asia's geopolitical landscape, the resurgence of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) signals more than just a political realignment - it marks the rise of a China-aligned force at India's doorstep, threatening to push New Delhi further into a strategic corner.

The recent rise of the JVP in Sri Lankan politics has set off alarm bells across India's strategic and diplomatic circles. Once infamous for its guerrilla tactics and far-left insurgencies, the JVP and its leadership, spearheaded by Anura Kumara Disسانayake (AKD), have resurfaced as a dominant political force. But behind the populist rhetoric lies a complex history and a set of alliances that could tilt the region's balance in China's favour, undermining India's security and geopolitical influence.

The JVP's roots are steeped in violent history, particularly its links to Sinhala nationalism and ethnic chauvinism. Under the leadership of its founder, Rohana Wijeweera, the JVP led uprisings that terrorized Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s. Though initially founded as a Marxist-Leninist movement, it quickly morphed into a Sinhala nationalist party that stood in stark opposition to the Tamil cause.

In the 1980s, the JVP played a significant role in fostering anti-Tamil sentiment, eventually aligning with the Sri Lankan government during the brutal civil war that led to the massacre of thousands of Tamils. Wijeweera's leadership saw the party transform from an idealistic revolutionary force into a paramilitary organization that, alongside the Sinhalese nationalist forces, carried out gruesome acts

of violence, targeting Tamil civilians in their homes, schools, and neighbourhoods.

In 1989, Wijeweera was executed by the government, but the party's legacy of Tamil oppression lives on. Today, the resurgence of the JVP, with Disسانayake at the helm, is not a mere political victory; it signals a return to the chauvinist ethos that once threatened Sri Lanka's unity. The most concerning aspect of JVP's rise is its potential alignment with China's geopolitical ambitions.

Sri Lanka has long been part of China's 'String of Pearls' strategy — a series of Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and political partnerships aimed at encircling India and securing its maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean. China has steadily built its influence in Sri Lanka, investing in key infrastructure projects like the Hambantota Port and Colombo Port City, which critics argue have pushed the country into a debt trap.

A JVP-led government, with its history of anti-India sentiment and dependence on external powers, could serve as a willing proxy for Chinese interests in the region. This becomes even more problematic when we consider China's role in backing regimes and movements that are antithetical to Indian interests. Sri Lanka's strategic location makes it a key player in the Indian Ocean, and a JVP-led government could facilitate China's military and economic influence in ways that would directly undermine India's security in the region.

For India, the victory of the JVP under AKD's leadership is not just a political setback but a humanitarian and cultural concern as well. India has long had an emotional and historical connection to Sri Lanka's Tamil pop-



ulation, a group that suffered greatly during the civil war. The JVP's history of being against Tamil rights, and its collusion with Sinhalese extremists during the war, raises deep concerns about the future of ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka.

As Tamil Nadu watches developments across the Palk Strait with increasing anxiety, any rollback on Tamil rights and a return to ethnic chauvinism will not sit well with Indian policymakers. Such a scenario could inflame tensions between India and Sri Lanka, especially in the southern states, and could further destabilize the region.

India's position in the region has already been weakened by China's growing influence in neighbouring countries like the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Sri Lanka

has been a critical outpost for India in its attempts to counterbalance Chinese power in the Indian Ocean. The JVP's victory, and its potential pivot towards China, would severely undermine these efforts, leaving Bhutan as one of the few remaining nations in South Asia where India still holds a strategic advantage over China.

For India, the stakes are high. The JVP's return to power could further erode India's influence in its own neighbourhood, pushing the region deeper into China's sphere of control. If the current political trends in Sri Lanka continue, India may find itself encircled by a growing bloc of Chinese-aligned nations.

The rise of the JVP may bring hope to some within Sri Lanka, particularly those disillusioned with the ruling elite. However, the party's history, its ethnic

chauvinism, and its potential alignment with China make its victory a serious concern for India. For China, a JVP-led Sri Lanka would be yet another gem in its 'String of Pearls,' tightening its grip on the region. For India, it would be yet another geopolitical setback in its backyard, with long-term consequences for regional security and stability.

India must remain vigilant and reassess its strategies in the region to counterbalance this growing Chinese influence, even as it watches closely to see what form of governance and international alignment the JVP will bring to Sri Lanka. As the JVP tightens its grip on power, Sri Lanka risks falling firmly into the clutches of the Chinese dragon.

(The writer is Associate Professor, Centre For South Asian Studies, Pondicherry Central University.)

## 100 YEARS AGO OCCASIONAL NOTE

THAT South Africa should be able to undersell Indian coal in the Bombay market is an anomaly to which attention was drawn by the President of the Indian Mine Managers' Association at its annual meeting on Monday. South African coal, as Mr. Mukerjee pointed out, is assisted by a bounty and other advantages, while the coalfields of Bihar and Orissa or Bengal are handicapped by high transport costs. The proposed remedy of a countervailing duty on the bounty-fed competing product is admittedly a complicated matter. Meantime the Indian coal industry is "bearded in its own den." In the course of his address the President referred to the perennial labour question, and expressed regret that the labour movement in this country should be guided and fostered largely by political agitators, for their own ends. The coal-owner and mine manager, however, should be able to defeat the agitator, first by a progressive policy such as that for which they were given credit in the report of the Jharia Mines Board as regards housing; and secondly by publicity, of which the Manbhum branch of the European Association lately gave an example in replying to the misrepresentations of Messrs. Grundy and Mills in the House of Commons.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### CHITPORE ROAD

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."  
SIR,—It is a matter for complaint that the tramcars plying through a crowded street like Chitpore Road are run so carelessly that accident after accident is reported almost daily. Almost all the way from Madanmantola to Labazar the foot-boards of the tramcars pass almost along the footpath, causing great annoyance and sometimes danger to pedestrians. There is only one footpath on one side of the Chitpore Road, which is so narrow that it can hardly accommodate two or three persons. Then again, in some places, one-fourth of the footpath is commonly occupied by hawkers—another source of trouble and inconvenience to passers-by. There are many lanes and bye-lanes opening into the Chitpore Road, and in passing these places caution is needed on the part of the tram-cars. Why should not the Tramway Company keep guards posted at these crossings and why should they not take special precautions where schools and bazars are situated. They should take special care in driving their cars at those places with lessened speed.

If the Mayor and the Chief Executive Officer would drive through the Chitpore and Strand Roads now and then it would give them an idea of my complaint and they would see in what filthy condition these roads are still kept. (I mean after the accession of the Swarajist party to the Municipality). Do we not expect improvement of our sanitary condition from the present Municipality, especially when the sweepers' wages were increased at our cost, by which act Deshabandhu has won the hearts of the municipal sweepers and menials?

I appeal to the Corporation to see that the causes of these grievances and complaints, which have been longstanding, be immediately removed.  
COMPLAINANT.  
Sept. 15.

### STORY OF A GERMAN SECRET

TO THE EDITOR OF THE "STATESMAN."  
SIR,—With reference to your editorial about German responsibility for the Great War, may I give you my experience which, I have no doubt, will help you to fix the blame on the right party.

During the War I was in command of a German prize ship seized by the Portuguese Government called the Numantia, renamed Pangun. The Numantia carried a secret packet which was only to be opened on receipt of a certain wireless signal. The packet had been on board the ship three years before the wireless signal was received—the Numantia being at the time on her way from Colombo to Aden, bound Home, and it read:—"War declared against Great Britain; proceed to nearest neutral port."

So she up helm and proceeded to Marmugoa (Portuguese territory) and found shelter with several other German vessels. When the Portuguese joined up with the Entente she seized all enemy vessels in her ports; amongst them the Numantia, and these astounding facts were found in her log books.

You will note that the secret message says "War declared against Great Britain," whereas it was Great Britain that declared war against Germany. The inference is obvious.

—Yours, etc., E. T. C. COX,  
(Master Mariner).

# Oli's pettiness undermines India ties

AJAYA BHADRA KHANAL

Here's what Nepal's Prime Minister KP Oli told the parliament on Monday, saying he was giving the address for a "special" reason: "Nepal wants to maintain neighbourly relations as a good neighbour, not a petty, scheming neighbour...Nepal wants a similar behaviour on the part of its neighbours."

He pursued this line of argument, implying that India is wishing ill on Nepal, imposing on Nepal's sovereignty and interfering in its independent status and policy. He then told the parliament that he would present the issue at the United Nations General Assembly.

It basically amounts to saying he will complain to the UN about India's behaviour.

What a petty idea. Given his inherent character trait, PM Oli will find it difficult to develop trusted relations with India in the short term. His only option is to be diplomatic, predictable and consistent. So far, he's not been able to do that. It does not bode well for Nepal's foreign policy, which is the most important means of pursuing Nepal's current priorities, including jobs, growth and climate change.

Oli's statement in the parliament indicates at least three things. First, his expectations from India have not been fulfilled. Second, his communications with the country have broken down. And third, he thinks India may be working to undermine his political authority.

Let's look at his expectations from the southern neighbour. Oli wants to hold high-level talks with PM Modi of India and build trusted relations.

In the past two weeks, media reports and opinion pieces have discussed whether Oli would be invited to India or not. It has almost become customary in Nepal for a new prime minister to visit India first before embarking on other high-level visits. Such a custom indicates the value politicians accord to India, especially if they want their government to be stable.

The second indication is that Oli is finding it difficult to communicate with people who matter in India. When you begin to communicate your feelings about India through the media, it indicates that your direct communications have either broken down or are ineffective.

Behind Oli's statement is an obvious intention to play the blame game or rally the public. India may be at fault for many things, but blaming India does not absolve him of inconsistencies on his part or the sheer inability to conduct diplomacy in a dignified manner.

The third indication is even more significant. Oli has consistently promoted anti-Indian nationalism, and India finds it difficult to trust him. But would that alone be enough to undermine his government?

Throughout history, India has had a significant influence on Nepal's political process and decision-making. Through its influence on individuals who've received gifts, benefits, and resources, some at the highest levels,

India holds significant leverage over political decision-making and, by extension, over policies and processes.

India's calculated relations with the Nepali state came to the fore in August this year when Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba visited India. New Delhi turned her visit into a high-profile affair even though she was unprepared to represent Nepal's interests. Her visit, rather than building political trust, ended up creating more mistrust between Oli and New Delhi as well as between the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office.

Although it is a matter of speculation, there are strong grounds to argue that such a courtesy would not have been extended to someone from the CPN (UML). It generates the question, at least in the public's mind, whether India accorded special treatment to FM Rana as a "special" individual who happened to be the foreign minister and not as a representative of Nepal.

Whether real or not, the perception that India is unhappy with Oli has fuelled the notion that the current government coalition is unstable.

Throughout Nepal's modern history, whenever top leaders are forced out, they tend to seek India's support to regain power. I have heard firsthand from top political leaders that India used to put a pre-condition: First, demonstrate that you have people's support, then we will use our leverage to help you. Thus, the political leaders would launch a political campaign and hold mass meetings throughout the country. If the broader

political environment favoured a political change, then India made the additional push.

Now, as Pushpa Kamal Dahal tours the country, blaming a corrupt network of power brokers, we are reminded of this old playbook. During mass meetings, an embittered Dahal frequently alleges that "middlemen, brokers, and big cronies have gotten together, and with the strength of so-called numbers, have tried to strangle truth, justice...and good governance." He also tells the public that his government was ousted because the investigations on corruption were leading to Budhanilkantha (Deuba's residence) and Balkot (Oli's residence).

For Oli, an inherent anti-Indian streak in his psychological make-up and an affinity with the Communist Party of China makes rapprochement with India difficult.

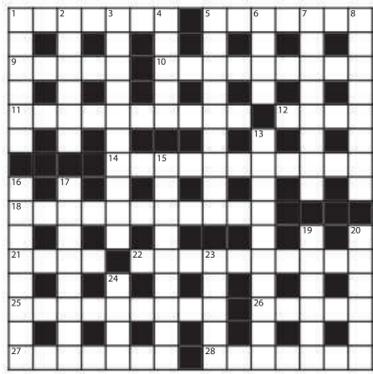
In the last 10 years, Oli has made countless petty statements intended to rile and irritate India. He has also accorded China greater space in Nepal.

In his book, former deputy PM Kamal Thapa expresses distaste at the way Oli made an unscheduled visit to China Gezhouba Group Corporation and disappeared for one and a half hours for a private meeting with Chinese Communist Party officials during his visit to China in 2016.

Another issue is the Eminent Persons' Group report, which Oli raised during the launch of Thapa's book. "It would be good to receive the report," he said during the programme. He made more anti-Indian remarks at another similar event.

## CROSSWORD

NO-292912



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

### ACROSS

- Foreign Office initially sends deranged Australian to rummage (7)
- Grizzly infant to stand with inexperienced reporter (4,3)
- Brown and green light — this takes two (5)
- European in spot gets excited about current spirit (9)

### DOWN

- Mice emptied place for grain left over in city (10)
- Extent of Crusaders objective? (4)
- Field dismal without young man — top player (7,4)
- Smoke and marine pollution here skinned smooth urbanite (4,7)
- Help needed to cross river that's dry (4)
- Untouchable carcass not to be moved (10)

- Restricted area with monstrous bird in bottle (9)
- Season failing to start for Bury (5)
- Why chicken didn't cross road: exhausted (3,4)
- Debt collector back in action exposed (7)

- Dissident, stoical, reviewed Tory cuts (10)
- One causing buzz, Egyptian spirit loves to embrace unknown (5)
- Bar on one Scots town where agistrate held sway? (9)
- Sea food from loch within range (4)
- Lion perhaps devours couple, causing gossip (8)
- In passing through on vacation, we're going outside? (2,3,5)
- Attack SAS, Goering ordered (10)

- A race covering one mile demands energy (9)
- Military engineer receives credit as fighter (8)
- Northern club actress Helen under stone (2,6)
- Married college boy? (6)
- Celebrity editor held consistent views? (6)
- One given pound, apparently indebted, angered (5)
- Bounce back as nymph consorting with Zeus (4)

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

## A call for peace and reform

PM Modi's UNGA address, following the UN's adoption of a 'Pact for the Future,' underscores India's commitment to peace

In a powerful address at the United Nations General Assembly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised the urgent need for global peace and called for comprehensive reforms in top international bodies. Speaking at the "Summit of the Future" held at the UN headquarters in New York, Modi stated, "reform is the key to relevance." His message resonated deeply amidst the complex global landscape marked by emerging conflicts and ongoing challenges. PM Modi articulated that the true success of humanity lies in collective strength, advocating for unity rather than conflict. He declared, "for world peace and development, reform is essential for global organisations." He was clearly hinting at the need for revamping the United Nations itself. This call for reform is particularly poignant given the multitude of challenges facing the international community today, ranging from terrorism to new fields of conflict such as cyber threats, maritime disputes, and space exploration. Modi stressed



that "global action must match global ambition," highlighting the need for coordinated efforts to tackle these pressing issues. His message of peace comes on the heels of the UN General Assembly's adoption of a "Pact for the Future," designed to address the challenges of the 21st century, including climate change, human rights, and conflict. This pact, however, was met with resistance from seven nations, led by Russia, which is currently embroiled in armed conflict with Ukraine. Russia's representatives expressed dissatisfaction with the agreement, arguing that it failed to adequately include diverse perspectives and stifled negotiations. Dmitry Polyansky, Russia's First Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN criticised the pact, stating, "The United Nations had infringed upon its own principles to pander to a group of delegations from the 'beautiful garden,' who have usurped the talks from the very beginning." This remark underscores the ongoing geopolitical tensions that challenge global unity. Despite these challenges, PM Modi's address at the UN showcases India's increasing influence on the world stage. By advocating for reforms and prioritising global peace, India positions itself as a key player in international diplomacy. Modi's leadership not only reflects India's aspirations for a more equitable global order but also underscores its commitment to addressing contemporary challenges through collaboration and dialogue. As the world faces an array of complex issues, Modi's vision of reform and peace serves as a crucial reminder that the path forward must be paved with collective action, mutual respect, and a commitment to the principles of democracy and justice. In this pivotal moment, India stands ready to lead and contribute to a more stable and harmonious global community. India has also gained prominence as a peace maker and could emerge as a major negotiator in world arena.

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### PICTALK



A farmer winnows paddy grains during procurement season, at a grain market in Amritsar

# The pursuit of peace in tumultuous times



RAJDEEP PATHAK

The UN General Assembly adopted the "Declaration and Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace," 25 years ago; it is a poignant reminder of the importance of nonviolence and justice

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while addressing the 79th UN General Assembly Session on September 23, 2024, reiterated the idea of adopting human-centric development for enhancing sustainability. Addressing the members at the "Summit of the Future", the Prime Minister emphasized the need for global reforms to foster peace, development, and collective progress. He underscored that humanity's success lies not in conflict but in harnessing collective strength. The meeting of the 79th UN General Assembly - immediately after the commencement of the International Day of Peace - which the world observed on September 21, is again a reminder of the power - and necessity - of nonviolence, dialogue, and reconciliation. In a world grappling with various forms of violence, the call for peace demands a concerted effort.



The very recent chilling incident of an annihilation attempt in Lebanon has thrust a long-forgotten technology back into the spotlight: the pager. On September 17, 2024, a coordinated attack sent shockwaves through the region when hundreds of pagers, used by Hezbollah members and medics, exploded simultaneously. The devastating blasts claimed the lives of at least nine people and left nearly 3,000 badly injured. While the political ramifications are immense, the sheer audacity and sophistication of this attack are terrifying. The hijacking of a seemingly obsolete technology for such lethal precision raises haunting questions about modern warfare and its evolving, invisible threats vis-à-vis the effort of reconciliation amidst unending turmoil such as these. In this direction, Mahatma Gandhi's vision of peace stands as a beacon of hope. He believed that true peace is not merely the absence of war, but a dynamic force rooted in justice, truth, and nonviolence. To Gandhi, peace was a way of life, achieved through self-discipline, empathy, and an unwavering commitment to the welfare of all. Gandhi's thought process emphasised that lasting peace could only be built on the foundations of truth and ahimsa (nonviolence), where individual and collective actions are guided by compassion, respect, and cooperation. His concept of Sarvodaya - the upliftment of all - called for each person to contribute to the common good, recognising that peace could not thrive in isolation but required the well-being of every individual. Inspired by Gandhi's legacy, we are reminded that the path to sustaining this delicate, yet priceless state, lies in our hands. As the political scientist "Johan Galtung", known as the founder of peace and conflict studies puts it, "Peace is not the absence of conflict but the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means." Galtung went ahead to underscore the importance of dialogue, empathy, and the peaceful settlement of disputes - (vital principles) - in a world grappling with rising geopolitical tensions, internal conflicts, and growing polarisation. In his seminal work, "Terror in the Mind of God," historian and American Sociologist, "Mark Juergensmeyer" argues that acts of terror are often root-

ed in a perceived cosmic war between good and evil. He emphasises that "The ultimate goal of peace cannot be achieved by military means alone but through addressing the underlying causes of violence, such as political exclusion, economic disparities, and social injustice." This reflects the need for a broader strategy incorporating dialogue, economic cooperation, and cultural understanding. Gandhi's Satyagraha - The Ingredient for Peace - Long before September 11 became a symbol of destruction, it marked the birth of a powerful, but peaceful revolutionary force. On September 11, 1906, in Johannesburg, Mahatma Gandhi launched his first "Satyagraha" campaign, rooted in truth (Satya), nonviolence (Ahimsa), and moral courage. As Nelson Mandela once said, Gandhi's philosophy "contributed in no small measure" to transforming not just South Africa but the entire world. Judith Brown, in his book "Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope", calls Satyagraha a "moral experiment", where conflict was resolved ethically, not violently. This approach shaped India's independence. Peace as the Only Panacea in a divided world where conflicts grow more complex and risk esca-



GANDHI'S THOUGHT PROCESS EMPHASISED THAT LASTING PEACE COULD ONLY BE BUILT ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF TRUTH AND AHIMSA (NONVIOLENCE), WHERE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ACTIONS ARE GUIDED BY COMPASSION, RESPECT, AND COOPERATION

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lation, it is crucial to return to the principles of peace and nonviolence. Political Scientist Michael Howard reminds us that "Peace cannot be imposed from above; it must be constructed from below," through trust, education, and dialogue - values central to the UN's Declaration on a 'Culture of Peace.' As we also approach the International Day of Nonviolence on October 2, (Gandhi's birth anniversary), we must heed the lessons of war. At this crossroads, we must choose: to continue on the path of division or embrace the dialogue, compassion, and justice championed by Gandhi, Mandela, Bhabe, King, and many other silent crusaders of peace. The benefits of a peaceful world are profound, fostering stability, prosperity, and the overall well-being of humankind. Peacemakers, perse, remind us that peace is more than the mere absence of war; it requires the continuous pursuit of justice, collaboration, and respect. British historian A.J.P. Taylor had succinctly put it, "War is a failure of diplomacy and peace". It is time for collective - and renewed effort. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are personal)

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### SRI LANKA TAKES LEFT TURN

Madam - Anura Kumara Dissanayake, 55, has become a symbol of political transformation in Sri Lanka, rising from a humble rural background to claim the country's presidency in a groundbreaking election. Anura secured 42.31 per cent of the vote, while Sajith Premadasa followed with 32.71 per cent, and the incumbent President, Ranil Wickremesinghe, garnered just 17.27 per cent. Anura's early life was marked by his deep connection to the struggles of Sri Lanka's rural heartland. Unlike many other dynastic or aristocratic leaders rooted in majority Sinhala Buddhist politics, it was not academia or racial-ethnic identity that shaped his future. While in university in the early 1990s, his growing political activism drew him to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a left-wing Marxist-Leninist party that was characterised by armed uprisings in 1971 and 1987-89 and represented the oppressed Sinhalese rural youth. The violent insurrections led by the JVP were fuelled by a hard-line Marxist ideology aimed at overthrowing the existing political and economic systems, which they viewed as exploitative and feudalistic. Thus we could witness Lanka taking a left turn and moving fast for a new era in island politics.

Dorai Ramani Suresh | Ghaziabad

#### PROTECTING KIDS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Madam - Apropos to "Social media age limit: Will banning children be enough?" published on September 23, here is my response. This is a critical debate and we should not be surprised if this reaches Indian shores from Australia soon. Every technological innovation has its own pluses and minuses. Banning it completely may sound a drastic move, but what is needed is more comprehensive discussions around it in the current context where children are more exposed to social media and in turn more vulner-

#### Challenges faced by LGBTQ+ community



LGBTQ+ people face so many challenges and experience a lot of discrimination in employment, healthcare, as well as in their personal lives. They are bullied and harassed

at work places also. Violence against the LGBTQ+ community is a serious matter. One should not face any kind of discrimination based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. It's just that they are genetically designed this way. But some are killed simply because of who they are. In the normal course of life, they often face social stigma, leading to depression and anxiety, which directly affects their mental health. LGBTQ+ people find it difficult to create a supportive community. They also find it very difficult to manage family relationships. They often face loneliness and complete isolation from society. We should stand together and provide them support and cooperation, listen to them, and accept them for who they are by showing our care. Only this way they will be able to get fit and comfortable in our society.

Neha Tomar | Ujjain

able also from an early age. Certain age restrictions, limit usage zones, setting clear expectations are a good beginning but along with it what can really make a difference is how we as parents are able to motivate our children to take part in outdoor physical activities and have more offline interactions so that their overall lifestyle balances out and it helps in their overall mental development as well. Family, society and school all will have to play their role here to ensure children are not becoming prisoners of social media.

Bal Govind | Noida

#### COURT QUESTIONS BULLDOZER ACTIONS

Madam - Many houses were demolished by bulldozers in Uttar Pradesh to punish some accused before the completion of the trial. This has continuously bulldozed the line of separation of power between the executive and the judiciary. The executive cannot act like the cur called Fury in the nonsense trial as depicted in the book, 'Alice in Wonderland', and say to a convict, "Let us both go to law: I will prese-

cute you. Come, I'll take no denial: we must have a trial." It will be ludicrous to buy the logic of the cur called Fury. How can "I'll take no denial" of an accused and "We must have a trial" exist simultaneously? After many houses were bulldozed, the Supreme Court, at last, on September 2, questioned the bulldozing of homes and private properties of persons accused of crimes. Justice B.R. Gavai asked, "How can anybody's home be demolished because he is an accused in a case?... Can it happen even if a person is a convict?" Indeed, the executive cannot add more punishment to what was given by the judiciary for a convict. Should the administration destroy the future of innocent children by destroying their homes if their father is a criminal? Rather, it is the duty of the state to ensure that the innocent family members of a convict may not suffer humiliation and are not forced to accept illegal ways for survival.

Sujit De | Kolkata

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

## The perils of imparting higher education in local languages

While promoting local languages in higher education aims to increase inclusivity, it may also pose challenges to the quality of education

The debate of whether education should be imparted in English or a regional language has been actively rhyming in our post-independent society. It's true that as a nation we have to preserve our rich culture and tradition, but at the same time, we need to equip our present generation to take up the challenges in the future, like space age and AI. During colonisation, English was forced on us to make the jobs of foreigners easy. In that process the foreign rulers who ruled our land even learned native languages, sometimes better than native Indians, to understand our rich scientific knowledge. Because of this, they were able to produce scholarly works about Indian Knowledge Systems better than native Indians. This has also helped the world recognise Indian Knowledge in the long run. On the flip side, the dominance of English has badly affected the status of many native languages. The British educational reforms prioritized English-medium instruction, particularly at the higher levels. This led to a situation where proficiency



in English became synonymous with access to power, jobs, and social mobility. Many educated Indians, especially in urban areas, began to adopt English as their primary language, sidelining regional languages. This created a linguistic divide between the English-educated elite and the native-language speaking masses. The historic NEP 2020 envisioned reorienting our attention to regional languages in the education system. Unfortunately, its focus on nurturing local language in science and technology education has become problematic because of hyper activism. Many states are involved in the translation of science, engineering and medicine textbooks into regional languages. Though these will serve as a valuable document to preserve our languages, they

won't help in improving the quality of higher education. Even before NEP, in many state universities, there was a provision to write science in their regional languages. But there were few takers for that. Even today when we make propaganda to promote regional languages, it's not implemented uniformly. All these policy changes, good or bad, will affect only students studying in public sector institutions. Unfortunately, none of the children of our government servants politicians' or even activists study in these public sector educational institutions, so they are not concerned about whether it will improve quality or not. So all this language love is 'only for others, not for me'.

This culture is again creating a linguistic divide in our society, which the British did to us long before. Whether we like it or not, English is the only language that acts as a bridge connecting various sections of our country. And in higher education, especially in science and technology courses where information is gathered from the knowledge generated in other coun-

tries, it has become the only language of that can connect us with the global knowledge hub.

How can we generate good engineers or scientists if they are not competent to understand English? Will be there any takers for an engineering or science course if offered in a regional language? How will our future youngsters survive in an AI dominated digital world where English is the lingua franca for the global workforce? How will they survive in a space colony? English is undeniably the global language of science, technology, and research. Most cutting-edge scientific papers, engineering manuals, and international patents are published in English.

Though a bilingual mode of education can be adapted to teach complex scientific facts, totally neglecting English from our higher education will be a death trap for our science and technology. Unnecessary language chauvinism will erode the quality of higher education. (The author is the Academic affairs, Garden City University and adjunct faculty at NIAS, Bangalore, views are personal)



BIJU DHARAMAPALAN



## FIRST COLUMN

## KILL BOREDOM BY WORKING FOR THE SOCIETY

Engaging in meaningful social work can kill boredom and give immense joy



SHAINY SHARMA

Boredom is a common experience that many individuals face, often leading to restlessness, unproductiveness and a lack of motivation. While there are various ways to combat boredom, one highly effective and fulfilling method is engaging in community service. Volunteering within the community may not only help alleviate boredom but also provide a wealth of personal and societal benefits. By promoting meaningful engagement, fostering social connections and offering opportunities to learn and grow, community service plays a crucial role in keeping individuals engaged and fulfilled. There is no denying the fact that community service gives people a sense of purpose, as they contribute to something meaningful. When an individual helps others, it keeps their mind engaged and focused on productive tasks. It introduces them to variety in their routine, allowing them to break away from repetitive or mundane activities that often lead to boredom. 'Boredom'—a term that often stems from feeling aimless or lacking direction, but when people dedicate their time to helping others, they find themselves contributing to a cause larger than their routine. Whether it is volunteering at a local shelter, participating in a neighbourhood cleanup or organising charitable events, community service gives individuals a meaningful reason to stay active. This sense of purpose not only fills time constructively but also leads to personal satisfaction, as individuals witness the tangible positive impact they are making in their communities. One of the most significant rewards of community service is the realisation that individuals are contributing to the greater good of society. Community service reverses this by showing volunteers the immediate impact of their actions.



Whether it's reducing hunger, improving local infrastructure or supporting vulnerable populations, every hour spent in community service makes a meaningful difference. This contribution gives volunteers a deep sense of fulfillment and pride in knowing that they are part of something bigger than themselves. By actively participating in the betterment of their community, individuals cultivate a sense of responsibility and connection to their surroundings, making it far less likely that they will feel bored or disengaged.

Community service has proved to be a powerful antidote to boredom. It engages individuals in meaningful work, fosters social connections, provides opportunities to learn new skills and allows for both mental as well as physical engagement. The sense of purpose and fulfillment that comes from helping others replaces the emptiness of boredom with productivity and satisfaction. Additionally, the positive impact that volunteers have on their communities contributes to a stronger and more connected society. Engagement in community service provides not only the older generation but also the young generation with purposeful activities that not only combat boredom but also offer personal growth, social connections and skill development.

It exposes young people to experiences they may not have encountered otherwise. Whether it's volunteering abroad, helping in different sectors such as health, education, and environment or interacting with diverse communities, these experiences add excitement and variety to their lives. Volunteering also introduces young people to new social circles, helping them meet like-minded individuals who share their passion for helping others. This interaction can reduce feelings of isolation, which is a common cause of boredom, especially for those who may not have a wide social network or stimulating environments. It will even help young people to grow personally by stepping outside their comfort zones and taking on new challenges. As they contribute to various projects and initiatives, they will build self-confidence and resilience, knowing they can make a tangible difference in the world.

(The writer is a motivator and a freelance writer; views are personal)

## Rising suicides among Indian students in Canada



SURJIT SINGH FLORIA

With recent changes in immigration policies and the mounting pressures of living abroad, an alarming number of Indian students are turning to suicide



Every year, countless international students arrive in Canada on study visas, hopeful of building a better future. However, many soon discover that the reality here is far from what they had envisioned. Tragically, this has led some to take their own lives.

At the same time, thousands of international students and workers in Canada, especially from India, are growing frustrated with recent changes to federal immigration policies. Many live under the constant threat of deportation. Protests and demonstrations, led by students carrying placards with their demands, have been organised in cities like Brampton and Vancouver to voice their grievances against the Canadian government.

While various communities have attempted to address this crisis by calling for proactive measures, the growing number of suicides is alarming. The grief, pain, and despair experienced by these individuals have not been adequately acknowledged, with many opting for suicide—a deeply troubling and heartbreaking trend.

In recent years, suicide rates have surged across Canada, cutting across age, gender, and social classes. What was once a taboo subject has now become a national crisis, exposing significant systemic failures. Despite efforts to build a stronger mental health infrastructure, the rising suicide rates highlight the need for urgent action.

To the people of Punjab, I must deliver a hard truth: Canada is not the land of opportunity it once was. Many are struggling with serious challenges. For now, it might be wise to reconsider your dreams of settling here.

According to Statistics Canada, the country experiences around 4,500 suicides annually. While we have data dif-



THOUSANDS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND WORKERS IN CANADA, ESPECIALLY FROM INDIA, ARE GROWING FRUSTRATED WITH RECENT CHANGES TO FEDERAL IMMIGRATION POLICIES. MANY LIVE UNDER THE CONSTANT THREAT OF DEPORTATION

ferentiating between age and gender groups, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences that drive these tragic decisions. In 2023, British Columbia reported 639 suicides—roughly 12 deaths per 100,000 people. This alarming figure has remained steady since 2016, with peaks in suicide deaths occurring in January, May, and August.

Behind these statistics lie stories of hopelessness and isolation. Unemployment, financial pressures, family breakdowns, and untreated or undiagnosed mental health issues push many to the brink. Over the past decade, Canada's socio-economic landscape has shifted drastically, contributing to these challenges. Rapid urbanisation, job losses, inflation, and the pressure to succeed have increased the mental strain on individuals, particularly foreign students. The government's focus on foreign relations, often at the expense of domestic welfare, has only made life harder for many.

Foreign students, in particular, are bearing the brunt of Canada's economic hardships, struggling with high living costs and loneliness. Without adequate financial support or mental health resources, many find themselves in despair.

The traditional social support systems that once offered emotional and financial stability have eroded, leaving many to navigate their struggles alone. A lack of mental health services further compounds the problem, with access to psychologists, therapists,

and counsellors remaining a privilege in many parts of the country. The stigma surrounding mental illness forces many to suffer in silence.

The role of technology, particularly social media, in this crisis cannot be ignored. While it serves as a vital communication tool, it has also become a breeding ground for cyberbullying and toxic comparisons. This environment, combined with societal pressures, has contributed to rising depression rates among the youth, some of whom tragically resort to suicide.

Canada urgently needs to reevaluate its mental health policies and increase funding for mental health services. The current Mental Health Bill must be accompanied by a clear implementation plan to make therapy affordable and accessible, especially for vulnerable groups. Unfortunately, the Trudeau government is facing political instability, with the departure of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, leaving the government in a precarious position. As a result, it's hard to expect meaningful action from them in the near future.

In the meantime, grassroots efforts to raise awareness and remove the stigma surrounding mental health are crucial. Communities need to create safe spaces where individuals feel comfortable seeking help without fear of judgment. This will require collaboration between government, civil society, and religious organisations to build support systems that individuals can rely on during crises.

The pressure on young international students—many barely 20 years old—to study, work, and support their families back home is overwhelming, especially in Canada's current economic climate. Parents must understand the immense burden they place on their children. With the same investment, students could thrive in Punjab, completing their education and building fulfilling lives.

This crisis requires a comprehensive response. A study exploring the beliefs of first-generation Canadian Punjabi Sikh parents regarding suicide revealed that factors such as peer relationships, parental pressure, hormonal fluctuations, and mental health issues contribute to suicidal behaviors. The findings highlight the need for better parental involvement and more accessible mental health services.

Finally, addressing the root causes of suicides—financial pressures, lack of job opportunities, and mental health support—is essential. Educational institutions and workplaces must offer proactive mental health services, and the government must establish financial assistance programs to alleviate economic stress.

The rising suicide rate in Canada is a warning to both the Canadian government and the Punjabi community. Immediate action is needed to save the lives of students and others on the brink of despair.

(The author is a veteran journalist and freelance writer based in Canada; views are personal)

## Anura Kumara Dissanayake's Victory: A new dawn for Sri Lanka amidst political upheaval

As Sri Lanka embarks on this new chapter, the implications for its ties with India and the broader geopolitical landscape remain critical

On Sunday, September 22, 2024, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, a prominent left-wing leader, won the presidential election in Sri Lanka, securing a victory that signals a significant departure from the country's traditional political establishment and heralds a period of unprecedented transformation. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka officially declared Dissanayake the winner after conducting the nation's first-ever second vote count, which included preference ballots.

"People are voting for change," said Dissanayake, the National People's Power alliance's presidential candidate, who was led by the JVP. "Change" became one of the primary slogans for the 2024



POOJA KAPOOR

presidential election. The election was remarkable in many ways—it was the first since the public uprising in July 2022, which forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa out of office. The election was largely centered around economic issues. Interestingly, the Rajapaksa family, which had dominated Sri Lankan politics for decades, had no influence on the election. Among the 38

candidates, Namal Rajapaksa, son of former President and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, was never considered a serious contender. The main contest was between opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, Dissanayake, and incumbent president Ranil Wickremesinghe, who assumed office after Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled the country in 2022.

Wickremesinghe campaigned on a platform of continuity, with his primary focus on stabilising the nation's economy following its debt crisis and collapse in 2022. His administration claimed to have restored some financial stability by securing an IMF bailout package, ending fuel rationing, and addressing economic turmoil. However, poorer sections

of the population, who were hardest hit by the economic collapse, saw little benefit from the stability he touted. The core cause of Sri Lanka's economic crisis was excessive borrowing for non-profitable ventures. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the government's insistence on depleting its limited foreign reserves to support the rupee, further crippled the economy. The severe shortage of essentials like fuel, food, cooking gas, and medicine led to mass public outrage. People stood in line for days to access basic necessities. As protests intensified, then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa was forced out of power, with demonstrators taking over key government buildings, including the president's residence



and office. Sri Lanka's deep political divisions continue to threaten the country's already fragile legislative framework, making effective governance increasingly difficult. These divisions risk perpetuating delays and inefficiency, potentially leading to a prolonged political deadlock that hinders the nation's progress. Antonio Gramsci's theory of passive

revolution is relevant here, highlighting the danger of significant changes that merely reinforce the existing power structures. Likewise, Hannah Arendt's observation that "The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative the day after the revolution" warns against decisions based purely on emotion rather than logic.

Sri Lanka and India have long been civilisational twins. India has historically maintained a deep interest in Sri Lanka's political landscape. Today, the island nation is one of India's most important regional allies, especially as some of its neighbors struggle with internal conflict or drift further from India's influence. Sri Lanka's proximity to key Indian scientific and security installations,

including nuclear reactors, space research centers, and naval bases in southern India, makes the island strategically vital. India's primary concern has been ensuring that no foreign power, particularly an adversarial one, gains undue influence in Sri Lanka. China's growing presence in Sri Lanka is a major point of contention. Both India and China are vying for a foothold in the country due to its strategic location for trade and military purposes.

India has actively worked to strengthen its ties with Sri Lanka. This is evident in Colombo, where India's Adani Group, with backing from US investments, is leading a multi-million-dollar expansion of the Colombo West International Terminal.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka has handed control of Hambantota, a major shipping hub, to China on a 99-year lease due to financial losses. In addition to its strategic interests in the Indian Ocean region, New Delhi is keen to maintain strong relations with Colombo to address the unresolved Tamil question in Sri Lanka.

In India's Vision SAGAR and Neighbourhood First Policy, Sri Lanka occupies a special place. Both countries' ministers can look forward to close collaboration to further develop and strengthen their bilateral relationship.

(The writer is an Associate Professor at the School of Liberal Arts - Bennett University, Greater Noida; views are personal)



# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2024



## ● AUDITING PUBLIC SERVICE

President Droupadi Murmu

“In an increasingly technology-driven world, more and more public services are being delivered using technology. Audit, therefore, needs to keep up with technological evolution in order to be able to perform its oversight functions effectively”

## When riches fall short

The 16th Finance Commission should check erosion of states' fiscal autonomy and incentivise performance

**UNLIKE THE 15TH FINANCE** Commission (FC), whose terms of reference was a source of controversy, the 16th FC has a clear mandate to ensure a fair distribution of fiscal resources between the Centre and states. Recognising that states that collectively undertake 60% of general government expenditure suffered a resource crunch more severe than the Centre's, the 14th FC made an attempt to correct the imbalance. It raised the untied transfers (share from divisible pool of taxes) to states by an unprecedented 10 percentage points to 42% (this was largely retained by the 15th FC). To be sure, even this wasn't a big tilt in the balance, as the mandated higher tax transfers came with a cut in assorted (tied) grants. In the end, it was only a compositional or qualitative shift, rather than a quantitative one.

To make matters worse for states, the Centre, mid-way through the implementation of the 14 FC award, resorted to flagrant use of cesses and surcharges, to bolster the tax resources it is not obligated to devolve to states. This constricted the fiscal space available to states as the proceeds from cesses jumped from 8.8% of the Centre's gross tax receipts in FY13 to as high as 30.5% in FY19, thanks mainly to the hefty increases in such taxes on auto fuels. As a result, the states' share in the Centre's gross tax receipts fell from 36.6% in FY19 to a little over 29% in FY21, before improving marginally. Though it may be argued that the cess funds are also being spent in the country (states), the assumption of the extra fiscal space by the Centre impinges on states' fiscal and policy autonomy. Moreover, as the Comptroller and Auditor General has pointed out repeatedly, there has been rampant "short-crediting" of the proceeds of various cesses to the designated funds — to the extent of ₹1.1 lakh crore in FY19, for instance.

There are grave fears among the states about how the fiscal relations are going to be defined by the 16th FC. The commission set out to work on its mandate, at a time when the Supreme Court's Constitution bench is reviewing the Centre-state fiscal paradigm, at the instance of a few state governments. These states allege "overreach" by the Centre, and seek protection against its "unwarranted" controls on their borrowing limits, etc. Also, the five southern states are peeved at their share of tax devolution declining from 21% during the 11th FC period to 15.8% in the 15th FC, despite their share in the gross domestic product (GDP) being over 30%. They are in a pique particularly because their past (better) performance is working against them and threatening to subvert further progress, as the FCs seek to address regional deprivations.

Fiscal resources ought to be disbursed with the overarching objective that states as a whole get due share of fiscal resources, and reasonable autonomy on how to use them. Some rewards must also exist for performance. The resources needed for special aids to the "backward" states could be mobilised by designating a part of the cess proceeds for this purpose, curbs on the Centre's spending on state subjects, etc. rather than via steps that would do material damage to other states. At the core of the problem is, for sure, the wide gap between the resources and the development needs, which needs to be bridged by raising the tax-GDP ratio.

## Good luck to Qualcomm in getting Intel Inside

**THERE'S OPPORTUNISM** — AND there's Qualcomm Inc.'s approach to buy Intel Corp. The acquisitive semiconductor giant has an opening to attempt such a momentous deal thanks to the yawning gap between their market capitalisations. The snag is that many obstacles remain to a successful transaction.

Intel is the legacy name in the chip industry. Qualcomm would make history gobbling it up. That is surely the main attraction. "Intel Inside" would become sadly ironic.

There's been quite a turn in fortunes on both sides. Intel shares are down more than 50% since the beginning of 2024, and the company was valued at \$93 billion at Friday's close before the *Wall Street Journal* reported Qualcomm's interest. Qualcomm stock is up nearly 20%, valuing it at \$188 billion. Only in January, Qualcomm was worth a lot less than its target. Now it can contemplate a deal where it would be in the driver's seat.

The business justification is more prosaic. Qualcomm would gain diversification, as *Bloomberg Intelligence* points out: A combination would reduce Qualcomm's reliance on handsets — currently about 75% of sales — by adding revenue from chips for personal computers and data centres. There's also the fact that Intel appears to be in a financial trough after years of underperformance relative to key rival Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. The US firm is forecast to be barely profitable this year, with operating profit recovering to \$3 billion next year and more than \$7 billion in 2026, according to Goldman Sachs Group Inc. research. Other analysts see a yet faster recovery. What better time to pounce?

Qualcomm's approach is for all of the chipmaker, *Bloomberg News* reported. Clearly, it may not be able to keep 100%. Asset sales will be required to assuage antitrust regulators. That's partially helpful as it shrinks the overall size of a transaction. But it brings the risk of having to take fire-sale prices on disposals. There is unlikely to be an easy preemptive fix. Consider Kroger Co. and Albertsons Companies Inc. — their grocery union two years ago was announced with a plug-and-play antitrust spinoff. Only last month did the Federal Trade Commission case come to court.

It's not just regulators that need to be assuaged. Why should Intel, led by Pat Gelsinger, play ball? No company's management team or shareholders like doing a deal when the share price is on its knees — unless there's a very high premium or certain value creation on offer through trading into the enlarged company.

Intel has taken the pain of a dividend suspension to fund investment in a turnaround. The stock plunged nearly 30% in August as a result, and the shares have barely recovered from that point. It's often better to wait for shares in your takeover target to recover a bit from a blow. The shareholders may then be less likely to feel taken advantage of.

Already, potential alternative courses are surfacing for Intel that raise questions about whether a takeover is the necessary or even lowest-risk solution to its woes. Buyout firm Apollo Global Management Inc. is proposing a \$5 billion "equity like" investment in Intel, *Bloomberg News* reported on Sunday. That could make a non-Qualcomm future more appealing.

Above all, Intel is a target whose deep operational and strategic challenges may not be solved simply with new ownership. The key to success is whether Qualcomm could run its desired purchase any better. There may be a bigger question mark over that when you're branching away from your core.

There are some echoes here with Capital One Financial Corp.'s tilt at credit-card peer Discover Financial Services in February — another deal aided by a divergence in share prices after the target had a profit warning. That's also facing huge regulatory risks. The bottom line is that even with US trustbusters itching to fight seemingly every merger, the lure of opportunism outweighs the antitrust deterrent.

So there you have it. Buying Intel should require twin battles to win over the target and regulators, with the end result being a deal that looks risky strategically and financially. But it would cement Qualcomm's and Intel's places in the annals of tech and M&A.



**CHRIS HUGHES**

Bloomberg

**IMAGINE CONTROLLING** A computer with nothing more than your thoughts. Or better yet, imagine asking Alexa to turn on the lights — not with your voice, but with a direct mental command. This may sound like science fiction, but it's rapidly becoming the science of today. Brain implants are paving the way for revolutionary technologies that allow people with disabilities to interact with the world in ways previously thought impossible. For paraplegics and others with similar conditions, this could mean regaining autonomy over their lives, including communication, mobility, and everyday tasks.

At the heart of this innovation is a field called brain-computer interfaces (BCIs). These devices, once the stuff of futuristic speculation, show real-world potential in restoring communication, control, and even sensation for those with physical limitations. The most exciting recent breakthroughs involve pairing BCIs with digital assistants like Alexa and Siri to offer seamless interaction and accessibility.

Brain implants work by interpreting the brain's electrical activity. Neurons communicate via tiny electrical impulses, and BCIs capture these signals using microelectrodes implanted in the brain. These signals are decoded and translated into commands controlling external devices, such as computers, robotic limbs, or home appliances.

This technology can offer profound benefits for paraplegics who have lost the ability to move or control parts of their body due to spinal cord injury or disease. The brain can send movement-related commands, but the severed spinal cord prevents these messages from reaching their intended targets, like the arms or legs. BCIs step in, essentially bypassing the damaged pathways and providing a new communication channel.

One of the most striking advancements has been BCIs' ability to integrate

## ● TECHPROOF EXPRESS

BRAIN IMPLANTS ARE TRANSFORMING LIVES FOR PARAPLEGICS

# Bridging minds and machines

## SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist  
By invitation



with digital assistants. Companies like Neuralink (founded by Elon Musk), Synchron, and Blackrock Neurotech are at the forefront of developing BCI technology that could soon allow people with paraplegia to control smart home devices and communicate digitally by simply thinking. In 2021, Synchron, an emerging leader in the field, successfully implanted their device in the brain of a man with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). This degenerative disease gradually robs people of muscle control, including the ability to speak. The implant allowed him to send text messages using only his thoughts. This device, known as the Stentrode, is less invasive than many other brain implants, threading a small electrode-laden stent into the brain via blood vessels. Once in place, it captures the electrical impulses corresponding to movement or intent and translates them into digital signals.

Now, *Wired* magazine reports that Synchron has, on an experimental basis, been able to seamlessly allow paraplegics who volunteered to command both their phones and Alexa to help them operate phones, tablets, and computers with their thoughts to surf the internet or compose emails. With the Amazon integration, they can control Alexa with a Fire tablet to turn the lights on and off at home, watch TV, make video calls, play music, control their Ring security camera, read books on

Kindle, and shop on Amazon ([bit.ly/47Dhrfn](https://bit.ly/47Dhrfn)).

This isn't just a convenience; for paraplegics or individuals with locked-in syndrome — where they cannot move or speak at all — this technology represents a lifeline to independence.

For many paraplegics, the most pressing challenge isn't just regaining control over their environment but re-establishing communication. ALS and similar conditions often leave individuals trapped inside their bodies, fully conscious but unable to move or speak. BCIs offer an elegant and profound solution: a direct mental connection to a computer that can express their thoughts.

Similarly, BCIs can allow paraplegics to control motorised wheelchairs or robotic arms. By envisioning the movement, the brain's motor cortex sends out signals interpreted by the implant and converted into real-world actions. This ability can grant mobility, another crucial aspect of independence, to those who have lost it.

Integrating BCIs with AI-driven digital assistants is a natural next step in improving accessibility. While digital assistants are already widespread — controlling everything from lighting to reminders in modern homes — they require voice commands or touch inputs, both of which may be inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. By linking BCI systems directly with

these assistants, users can think their commands instead. This provides a remarkable degree of independence in everyday life.

Furthermore, digital assistants' conversational nature adds a social layer to the technology. Instead of relying on caregivers for every small task, paraplegics and others with motor impairments can engage directly with the world around them — on their terms.

While the promise of brain implants is enormous, there are challenges to overcome. Decoding brain signals is still an imprecise science. The brain generates vast amounts of data, and distinguishing the correct signal from background noise can be difficult. Moreover, ethical concerns surrounding the invasive nature of implants and the potential for misuse of personal neural data remain hotly debated topics.

As BCIs advance, developers are also focused on making the devices more reliable, long-lasting, and less invasive. The Neuralink device, for instance, aims to be fully wireless and minimally invasive, using flexible threads inserted into the brain by a precision robot. This could make the technology safer and more accessible for widespread use.

The merger of brain implants and digital assistants paints an exciting picture for the future. For paraplegics, these technologies provide a crucial pathway to regaining control over their environment, enhancing communication, and restoring a sense of agency. The ability to control devices purely by thinking is an extraordinary leap forward — not just in accessibility but in what it means to be human in a digital age.

As research progresses and technology becomes more refined, the prospect of a world where paraplegics can communicate, control, and interact with their surroundings as easily as their able-bodied peers is no longer a distant dream but a soon-to-be reality. Cheers to that!

## Time to increase your export hedges



### JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial  
[www.mecklai.com](http://www.mecklai.com)

Companies that have held on to a pre-defined process, hedging certain amounts on pre-set signals, have generally seen very strong results

**THE DOLLAR INDEX** is threatening to break below its support at 100.80, and when — more likely than if — it does, the next stop (at least, technically speaking) is around 98. With many analysts and the Fed itself talking about another 1% of rate cuts before the year-end (on top of the large 0.5% hike on September 18), and, of course, the madness surrounding Trump and the upcoming election, the break could come fairly soon.

The rupee, which had climbed off the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) floor of 84 a week or so ago, has strengthened almost vertically since the rate hike, and it, too, is threatening a break — it is just 20-25 paise below a relatively long-term resistance and if/when that breaks, we could see substantially more gains. It is important to note that since January 2022, the rupee has twice strengthened by ₹2 (to the dollar) in a matter of weeks. In fact, if we go further back (to 2017), rupee strength has been much more substantial (5-10%) and has persisted for much longer (sometimes as long as 6-8 months).

Of course, the RBI, which has had to change its intervention direction suddenly in the past week, will certainly be in there to "smooth the volatility" and may even try to draw a line in the sand at, say 83. On the other hand, buying dollars to prevent rupee appreciation has the unpleasant side-effect of pouring rupees

into the market. The increase in liquidity would make it that much more difficult to keep food price inflation controlled. And, given that this is the singularly most difficult issue facing the government, particularly with the state elections around the corner, the RBI may end up stuck between a rock and a hard place if USD weakness overseas predominates.

Over the last two or three years, we have seen several companies reducing or completely stopping the hedging of exports, generally because the sharp fall of the rupee in 2022-23 rendered many of their hedges out of the money. To my mind, simply closing off hedging is never a good strategy because (a) you are carrying unlimited risk, and (b) it becomes very difficult to take a decision

on when to restart and determine how to go about it.

We have found that companies that have held on to a pre-defined process, hedging certain amounts on pre-set signals, have generally seen very strong results even after factoring in poor performance in a few quarters.

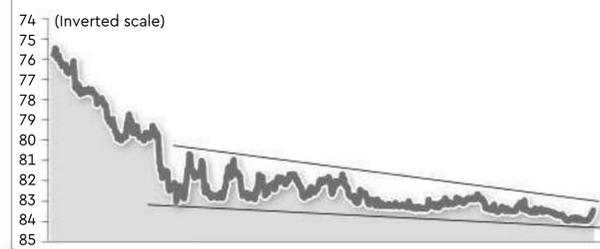
We have a client who has been using MHP, our structured hedging programme, for many years. Between June 2017 and April 2024, the rupee depreciated from 64.75 to 83.75, a total decline of 29%. Over the same period, the average forward premium was 3.65%, which would have provided a cumulative gain of about 25% on simply selling forward. While on the surface, this argues against hedging, the reality

— as experienced by our client — is that following our systematic approach delivered handsome gains of 1.14% as compared to staying unhedged. And while the performance was somewhat volatile, over any of the running three fiscal years covered since 2017 — 2018-20, 2019-21, 2020-22, 2021-23, 2022-24 — the realisations were always higher than staying unhedged, albeit to varying degrees, making up the average.

The client, who had relatively large exports (averaging \$165 million per year) was able to pocket gains of nearly ₹102 crore over the seven-plus years — that's nearly ₹15 crore a year! On a unit basis, the gains worked out to ₹85 lakh for every \$10 million of exports. Again, and significantly, the mark to market of the hedges, which translates directly to the accounts, reflected an average quarterly gain of ₹19.9 crore. There were quarters of losses, to be sure, but it was well contained at only six quarters out of 28.

Given that the rupee is again showing some signs of strength it is, in our view, critical to immediately increase your export hedges. The fact that the premiums have also risen (and are very likely to rise further) is a reason to use a structured programme which could help you balance the conflicting forces — gains from higher premiums versus reduction of spot value as a result of a stronger rupee.

### RUPEE VS DOLLAR SINCE JANUARY 2022



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Attacks on Lebanon

In a single day, Israeli attacks killed over 500 people, including 50 children, in Lebanon. The world seems to have become immune to the killings of innocent civilians by Israel. The US call for de-escalation in the region is just paying lip service to peace, which is clear from its continuing supply of war weapons to Israel to use them as it wishes. India also adopts double standards; on the

one hand, it proclaims its "unwavering support" to the people of Palestine, and on the other, it exports weapons to Israel for use in the ongoing genocidal war. When the mighty attack the meek, the world cannot look away. It is important for countries to take a principled stand against war and put humanity above everything else. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said at the United Nations that the success of humanity does not lie in battlefields. But he is less than vocal in

condemning Israel for killing civilians, with scant regard for human life. —G David Milton, Maruthanode

### Options trade losses

Futures and options (F&O) is a zero-sum game, and which retail player can match the sophisticated algos used by the big players? It comes as no surprise that 91% of the retail players have been losing money in F&O trades, according to a Securities and Exchange Board of India report. The

authorities have done a good job with gambling apps by arresting those running them, but it is hard to do the same with futures. Nothing can stop those with an addiction for gambling. The best the government can do is to issue a mandatory warning for each trade on the lines of the warning on a pack of cigarettes, not that it has stopped many from smoking. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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DECCAN  
**Chronicle**  
25 SEPTEMBER 2024

**Court move to protect kids will make us better society**

Civilisational advancements of societies get reflected in the way they treat their vulnerable. Each society may have its own processes and tools to identify those who need special protection, introduce these, and then institutionalise them. The Indian Constitution is one of the best manifestations how a society can do it.

However, certain grave lapses could occur in the process whereby the weak remain meek and societies fail to identify them for several reasons. In such cases, victims would suffer for wrongs they have not committed.

Children are one such section, long denied their rightful protection from wrongdoings of the grown-up. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act, 2012, and the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 partially filled these lacunae — the first is about how to treat children who land in the quagmire of crime and the second about how to protect children from sexual exploitation and punish offenders.

The Supreme Court verdict of Monday making downloading and watching child sexual exploitative and abuse material (CSEAM) an offence under the Pocso Act and the Information Technology Act, 2000, takes the whole process one more step ahead and must be seen as a bold attempt to make the lives children safer. The court overruled an observation of the Madras high court that mere downloading and watching such material without disseminating it did not constitute an offence under the Pocso Act.

It observed that children are entitled to grow up in an environment that respects their dignity and protects them from harm and child sexual exploitative material achieves quite the opposite. "It reduces them to objects of sexual gratification, stripping them of their humanity and violating their fundamental rights," the court observed. CSEAM violates children's right in the most "egregious manner possible" and the existence and circulation of CSEAM were "affronts to the dignity of all children, not just the victims depicted in the material," the court observed. It was only reflecting truth when it said that the impact of CSEAM on its victims was devastating and far-reaching, affecting their mental, emotional and social well-being, the only remedy for which is the strict enforcement of the law.

That the court has delved deep into subject of abuse of sexual abuse of children is evident from the fact that it has come out with an important marker for society. It said it is no more normal to call such material "child pornography", and directed courts in the country to use the term, CSEAM, instead, and it has also requested Parliament to consider bringing about an amendment to the Pocso Act to give legal backing to the change.

The import of the directive lies in the fact that the term "child pornography" in no way communicates the grossness of the egregious crime or its impact on the victim; it would be seen as the children's version of an adult act, which it is not. Parliament must immediately consider this suggestion as society must be made aware of the enormity of the act so that every stakeholder joins forces to end it.

The Supreme Court's intervention for the sake of our children must be taken to its logical end so that we become a better nation.

**World chess: A new order rises**

India's double gold at the 45th Chess Olympiad has signalled the rise of a new world order in the cerebral game. As the legendary Garry Kasparov aptly put it, "Vishy's children" have come of age, not only securing Viswanathan Anand's enduring legacy but also elevating it to unprecedented heights. What Anand couldn't achieve in his illustrious career, the young brigade has delivered in stunning fashion in Budapest.

Anand's influence extends beyond being a beacon of inspiration. Like the Soviet Union's famed Botvinnik Chess School, Anand has meticulously nurtured Indian talent through his own academy, guiding young minds with invaluable camps — especially during the Covid pandemic — and arranging funds for their overseas travel. Fittingly, one of his proteges, D. Gukesh, who earlier clinched the Candidates Tournament to become the next World Championship challenger, has spearheaded India's dominance at the Olympiad. Clinching all three trophies (including overall title), India stamped their supremacy in the field of 193 teams in the Open and 181 in the Women's section.

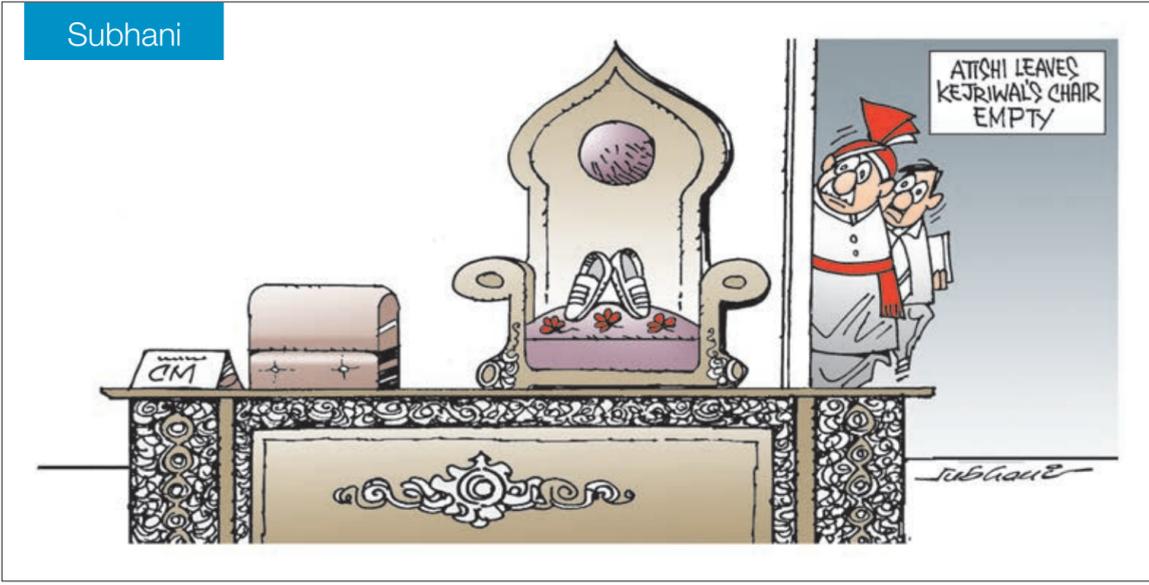
The team of Gukesh (18), R. Praggnanandhaa (19), Arjun Erigaisi (21), Vidit Gujrathi (29), and P. Harikrishna (38) led throughout the tournament, winning 10 matches and drawing just one. For veterans like Harikrishna and D. Harika (33), the dream of winning the Olympiad took over two decades. For young Gukesh & Co., success has come rather swiftly.

The journey from last edition's bronze to this year's unprecedented sweep is a tale of extraordinary determination. Gukesh, with a mature head on his young shoulders, took the responsibility for narrowly missing out on the title in the previous edition held in Chennai. This time, he was resolute in his mission to make amends and what a way to do it!

With an astounding 9/10 score and a staggering 3056 performance rating, Gukesh has set a new benchmark. Not only did he become the only player to breach the 3000+ mark at the Olympiad, but he has also thrown down the gauntlet for the World Championship contest with Ding Liren, to be held in Singapore later this year. While R. Praggnanandhaa's performance was solid, with six draws out of 10 games, it paled in comparison to the blistering form of Gukesh and Arjun. However, it's this collective excellence that marks India's ascendancy in chess.

The icing on the cake was the women's team making it a double gold in justifying their top seeding and pulling off a win despite a couple of less powerful performances towards the end. Their win here should prove inspiring for a new generation of women players to rise in the country, with age on their side, Indian players and the national teams could be capable of dominating world chess for some years to come.

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**'One Nation, One Election': Can it work, or will it fail?**



Shikha Mukerjee

While campaigning for the Lok Sabha polls, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had promised to roll out within 100 days of being re-elected an action plan that would transform India. His grand design, that is unlikely to succeed, is the "One Nation-One Election" decision by the Cabinet, specifically the minority BJP-led coalition government that can't work without a complicated constitutional amendment.

The bottom-line is that the Modi government doesn't have a mandate from the voter to get the "One Nation-One Election" plan going. Mr Modi ought to know it; if he has gone ahead without the mandate, it will require political skill to cover up a basic blunder of this magnitude.

Already there is speculation that the grandiose plan, a political masterstroke to align all elections with Mr Modi or the BJP's schedule of elections across India and in all three tiers of the democratic structure, may end up on the backburner, that is, sending it to a Joint Parliamentary Committee.

If Mr Modi's plan to hit the ground running in his third term is to bury in a committee a major reorganisation of the political timetable and the constitutional structure required to implement "One Nation-One Election", then it's time to start asking if he knows what he is doing and, more important, does he know how to get things done?

It is obvious by now that the BJP and Mr Modi as its star campaigner, political mastermind and principal strategist, do know what they cannot do; they cannot risk holding elections in Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Maharashtra and

Bihar all at once. If the BJP wanted and Mr Modi had the appetite for it, a common schedule for elections in these four states and two Union territories could have been worked out.

By ducking out of this, which could have aligned six more states with the schedule for the next Lok Sabha polls, Mr Modi has made it clear that he is unsure of his ability to persuade voters to choose the BJP over other parties in these states and Union territories. Putting into practice instead of preaching about the advantages of "One Nation-One Election" may have been a little more convincing than this charade that Mr Modi has chosen to perform.

Elections are not merely technicalities, nor are they just the means of winning a majority for the winner to quickly form a government and get on with the business of wielding power. Elections do enable a leader become the cock of the heap — Prime Minister, chief minister and even panchayat *sabha* *hadhipati* — but that is not their sole purpose.

Elections require the hoity-toity "netas" to canvass for votes; it teaches the high and mighty, every so often, that all the paraphernalia of being the cock of the heap depends on the approval of the ultimate sovereign, that is, voters. Throwing the weight of the elected majority around is not the aim of elections. Elections deliver a mandate, a verdict giving the leader of the majority a lease to run the government for a period of time that could be five years or less.

Holding office at the pleasure of the people comes with its own discomforts; displeasing the people has consequences. There are states in India where voters choose different parties in Lok Sabha and state Assembly elections, like

differences between national, state and local concerns.

In the last many Assembly polls, Mr Modi has been relentlessly pitching himself as the face of the BJP, as the icon voters must remember when casting their vote. Bundling every issue and concern into one package may serve the BJP's purpose, making it easier for Mr Modi to campaign. But that is not how others campaign. Demonsising Rahul Gandhi as "terrorist number one" may work for voters in J&K and Haryana, by polarising votes, but that's not what will work in Jharkhand or in Maharashtra.

One size does not fit all. To compel voters and states to fit the BJP's schedule of "One Nation-One Election" in the expectation that it will increase its political strength with more seats in Parliament and in the states cannot be India's goal, as a State or even as a nation. It is not enough for the Congress and the parties of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance to talk about defending the Constitution on behalf of the people; these parties need to raise public consciousness on how the Constitution and democracy could be endangered through the idea of "One Nation-One Election" and by extension, "One Party-One Leader" politics.

Regardless of the number of votes and other technicalities of pushing through a constitutional amendment, there are critical political and ideological issues that the rest of India's political class must raise in order to defend democracy in practice and stop authoritarianism in its tracks. The "One Nation-One Election" overturns the fundamentals of democracy, about peoples' power and their right to decide. It takes away the basics of initiating change by stripping people of the power to make decisions and periodically revise their decisions, through different schedules for different elections.

A political party and its leadership that disregards the diversity of India's people and their priorities is a danger to itself and the idea of unity despite the multiplacities in a democracy. The immediate local concerns of people must be foregrounded in Assembly elections and at a more granular level in civic and panchayat elections. The three tiers of elected bodies were designed to reflect the

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist based in Kolkata

**LETTERS**  
**ONOE WON'T WORK**

The idea of the country having a "one nation, one election" format has once again hit the headlines. The ONOE concept may not be feasible and pragmatic for a huge democracy and a secular nation like India. Such a theory involves not only practical challenges, but also complex legal and constitutional considerations. Making elections simultaneous and fixing a single date for them will crush the accountable and federal ethos on which Indian parliamentary democracy is based. The concept of ONOE is rooted in an economic and administrative logic that lean towards increased centralisation. It aims to reshape the nation according to a majoritarianism perspective, prioritising uniformity over diversity. The Modi 3.0 government should refrain from hastily pushing forward with ONOE implementation.

R.Sivakumar  
Chennai

**SRI LANKAN VOTE COUNT**

The people of Sri Lanka deserve all accolades for performing a silent revolution with the ballot papers in their hands. The Election Commission of Sri Lanka deserves special appreciation for conducting the Presidential elections in a smooth manner in one go on a single day and more importantly, for counting and announcing the results the very next day itself. Sri Lanka follows the tamper-proof ballot paper system which is a cumbersome process unlike the "infallible" EVM system followed by India. However, that they were able to complete the entire process the very next day itself, compared to the months-long process our Election Commission undertakes for conducting elections and announcing the results, despite use of the 'sophisticated' EVMs, is also a case in point. Our EC took months to complete our last general elections compared to the two-day process of Sri Lanka. Gone are the days when the developing nations used to look to us for guidance to conduct elections smoothly and quickly without any hassles. But now, we must learn from Sri Lanka how to complete elections smoothly and in record time.

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**Saeed Naqvi**  
**Wide Angle**



**Rein in capitalism on the rampage, or liberal democracy's days are numbered**

That Juan Guaido, 41, has described himself in his CV as "ex-President of Venezuela: 2019-2023" is not entirely fiction. When the world sleeps, the Free World's leader is in relentless pursuit of replacing dictatorships with democracy worldwide. Replacing Nicolas Maduro in Caracas with Guaido was one such enterprise.

"The Monroe Doctrine is alive and well", boomed Rex Tillerson, Donald Trump's secretary of state. It was therefore legitimate for the US to find a friend to install on the Caracas throne. Venezuela has the world's largest reserves of hydro-carbons.

Vice-president Mike Pence was asked to keep a close eye on Guaido as he shuttled between Colombia, the US and Venezuela to ascend the *gaddi*. When the Guaido initiative failed, the US was at it again; the headlines are still fresh on yet another failed effort to dethrone Maduro. Dutch foreign minister Caspar Veldkamp told Parliament that Venezuela Opposition leader Edmundo Gonzalez sought refuge in the Dutch embassy. Before his papers for exile could be processed, he found cultural continuity where he's likely to stay: Spain. It will be interesting to see what new salvo is fired for democracy. It must be galling for the US that colour revolutions no longer yield the desired results.

Western covert ops must have taken heart from developments where their own Fulbright scholar, Muhammad Yunus showed the door to Sheikh

Hasina, whose emotional ties to India and practical ones with China were becoming a puzzle. It must be said scholars like Jeffrey Sachs have been quite emphatic. The state department's Donald Lou was as active in Bangladesh and Pakistan as Victoria Nuland was in Ukraine. While the "regime change" apparatus is still functional in the US, Europe in its post-colonial phase has little use for it. It has other ways to ward off the Left; even occasionally tipping the scales in favour of fascism. Look at what was East Germany: Fascism has impressively opened its accounts in two states. France's political theatre has an engaging story line: how to stop the Left?

This story actually begins at the European Union elections in June where Marine Le Pen's right-extremist National Rally trounced Emmanuel Macron's right-of-centre party by miles. In a funk, Mr Macron dissolved the National Assembly and called parliamentary elections. The anxious French President hoped to recover lost ground. Exactly the opposite happened. Ms Le Pen zoomed past him, with 33 per cent votes in the first round. Not very far behind was the Left. Mr Macron came third with 21 per cent. There was no absolute majority.

The Fifth Republic had it, should Ms Le Pen win the second round. The Left and Mr Macron withdrew over 200 candidates from triangular contests to prevent any division of the anti-Le Pen vote.

The trick worked, but only to the extent that it stopped Ms Le Pen. She came third, but Mr Macron

and his corporate backers were in turmoil as the Left galloped way ahead. Mr Macron's neo-con agenda would clash head-on with the Left's socialism. Instead of appointing a Leftist Prime Minister as the numbers in the National Assembly dictated, Mr Macron appointed Michel Barnier from the Republican stable.

Will the Socialists break ranks from the Left Front? If not, the possible backroom deals may be sinister. Will Mr Barnier's minority government be supported by Ms Le Pen from outside? She will then control the Fifth Republic. The people's will, exemplified by the Left Front's progress, will then have been effectively neutralised by the Macron-Barnier neo-con agenda. Social welfare, price rise, healthcare, unemployment — issues that define the lives of people, will have been replaced by migration, identity politics, Islamophobia, military budgets, the staple that fascism feeds on.

What is being played out on an epic scale in France is mainly the pattern in most Western democracies. Remember the excitement when Alexis Tsipras became the first Communist PM of Greece, the cradle of Western civilisation? No sooner had the Communists reared its head than Germany, the EU's biggest donor, sat on Mr Tsipras' back. Greece's debts would not be honoured.

In Spain, the rise of Pablo Iglesias, 39, as leader of leftist Podemos, at about the same time as Mr Tsipras in Greece, caused a frenzied response from

the establishment: Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, whose huge corruption had precipitated the election which brought up Podemos, was manoeuvred into another term, corruption or no corruption. By attrition, Podemos was killed.

It was clear as daylight that Bernie Sanders was derailed by the Democratic Party's establishment largely over his socialist image. I wrote then: "If you make Sanders impossible, you make Trump inevitable." Likewise, if Jeremy Corbyn is impossible, Boris Johnson is inevitable. He succeeded clowning around as PM briefly. Right-wingers in the UK Labour Party like Peter Mandelson had sworn to "undermine" Mr Corbyn. As the Bible says: "there is nothing new under the sun".

This has been the pattern ever since Franklin Delano Roosevelt pulled his country out of the Great Depression of the 1930s-40s by taxing the very rich to pay for welfare schemes. The Socialists, Communists and trade unions had pressured him. The most popular American President in history who died in his fourth term ended up spawning corporate paranoia, which has not lost momentum till this day. Joseph McCarthy remains a reaction to anything resembling the New Deal. His spirit lives.

At least, in those early days of unbridled capitalism, a journalist of CBS News like Ed Murrow could single-handedly demolish McCarthy. Today, the field is left wide open for capitalist callousness.



## Visit wrap-up

The Modi U.S. visit announcements will see New Delhi being put to the test

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's three-day visit to the U.S. was marked by high-level meetings that had a three-part focus. He spent one day at the Quad and in bilateral meetings with U.S. President Joseph Biden, a day in New York with business leaders and the diaspora, and another day at the UN and in bilateral meetings. The Quad Summit, delayed due to political cycles in the four member countries, was more substantive than expected for a farewell meeting (Mr. Biden and Japan's Fumio Kishida will soon demit office). The joint statement was noted for its sharp language on Chinese aggression in the South China Sea, as well as on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, where the leaders upheld the UN charter on sovereignty and territorial integrity. The announcement of initiatives aimed at countering Chinese actions will no doubt raise Beijing's ire: a "Quad-at-Sea Ship Observer Mission" for 2025, a Maritime Initiative for Training in the Indo-Pacific (MAITRI) and a "maritime legal dialogue" to support the "rules-based order". However, India's hesitation in joining other Quad militaries in contested waters in the Pacific Ocean remains, and India's presidency of the Quad next year will show whether those are overcome. Quad countries also committed to a "Cancer Moonshot" to fight cancer, an initiative that can draw lessons from the troubled Quad vaccine initiative. India and the U.S. were able to announce progress on many strategic fronts including a military partnership for semiconductor fabrication and India acquiring predator drones. However, the ties faced unspoken tensions over the lingering effect of the Pannun case, including summons issued for NSA Ajit Doval in a civil suit and a White House meeting with Sikh activists who have campaigned against India – all before Mr. Modi's arrival. The message from Washington appears to be that the Pannun case cannot be overlooked.

Mr. Modi's message at the UN as well as in bilateral meetings with leaders including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was watched closely given recent moves hinting at India's involvement in a peace process. While Mr. Modi gave no further indication of such a plan, his discussions with Mr. Zelenskyy centred around a possible second peace summit. At a diaspora event, Mr. Modi said that India is now a "strong voice" of the Global South, and was taking up the concerns of the developing world on the conflict with the global leadership. At the UN "Summit of the Future", he added that the success of humanity would depend on its "collective strength, not in the battlefield". The next few months will see New Delhi tested not only on those lofty ideals and ambition for peace but also on actualising the many announcements made during the visit.

## It is an offence

Court has done well to clarify law on online content showing child sex abuse

The Supreme Court of India's clear delineation of the penal consequences of accessing or storing sexual material concerning children is in complete consonance with the letter and spirit of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. Demonstrating an enlightened approach to the social questions that arise from the proliferation of online content featuring sexual exploitation of children, a three-Judge Bench has not only clarified the law but also drawn pointed attention to the legislative intent of presuming the culpable mental state of a person accessing and viewing such material. The Court has also advocated that the term 'child pornography' be avoided in both the law and in court verdicts, as it appears to trivialise the enormity of the offence of exploiting children to create and disseminate sexual material to gratify the perversions of a few. Instead, the Court has suggested that such content be described as 'Child Sexual Exploitative and Abuse Material' (CSEAM). The verdict also lays to rest doubts over what exactly some provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000, and POCSO Act say on the subject, as High Court verdicts have differed on their exact implications. The case arose from a Madras High Court judgment that quashed a criminal case against an individual who had viewed sexual content involving children on the ground that the law only criminalised creating and disseminating such content, and not merely watching it in the private domain. The apex court has now set aside the High Court order.

Invoking the doctrine of "constructive possession", it has ruled that any act of viewing or displaying of child pornographic material over the Internet without actual possession or storage in any device would also amount to "possession", made punishable under Section 15 of POCSO, provided the person had a degree of control over such material. Further, an intent to share or transmit such material can also be inferred from any failure to delete, destroy or report such material. It has cautioned courts against narrow interpretation of some provisions so that the legislative intent of penalising cyber-offences relating to children is not defeated. It has drawn attention to Section 67B of the IT Act, terming it a "comprehensive provision" to penalise various electronic forms of exploitation and abuse of children online. The Court has reminded platforms and intermediaries of their duty to remove such content as well as report it to police units concerned. Its advice to the government to implement comprehensive sex education programmes that include the legal and ethical ramifications of child pornography merits immediate attention.

The swearing-in of Anura Kumara Dissanayake as Sri Lanka's new elected President on September 23, 2024, marks a new beginning of historical significance. It symbolises a dramatic shift in the class bases of political power – from a privileged minority of Colombo-centric, westernised elites to a broad coalition of non-elite social forces. If Sri Lanka's electoral democracy since its independence in 1948 had guaranteed the dominant elites unbroken continuity in political power, it has now produced a break with the past; a moment of the magic that democracy and free and fair elections can occasionally produce.

Significantly, the election outcome also marks a peaceful and bloodless transfer of power. The new President obtained his popular mandate with the promise of overhauling a corrupt and rotten system of government that had remained the birth right of the privileged social classes for nearly seven decades. The class monopoly of political power that has been institutionalised through democracy has now been ruptured by the demos themselves.

### Transition and political rise

The National People's Power (NPP), the political movement which Sri Lanka's new President leads, has a short but transformative history. It was formed in 2019 as an electoral front of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP-People's Liberation Front) with a moderate and centrist reform ideology. Mr. Dissanayake was the NPP's presidential candidate in that year. Until 2019, he was leading the JVP. The JVP had been formed in the 1960s, which was the period of the New Left throughout the world. The JVP emerged as a Left radical underground movement with a commitment to armed struggle to establish a South Asian version of revolutionary socialism. Parallel to similar radical movements in other parts of South Asia, the JVP's early ideology and political programme was influenced by Marxism and Maoism.

The JVP tried out two armed insurrections in 1971 and 1987-89. After the costly defeat in the last armed struggle, a new generation of JVP leaders, who abandoned the goal of socialism through the armed struggle, transformed the JVP into a parliamentary party. Mr. Dissanayake belongs to this new band of 'JVP-ers' committed at the time to the goal of socialism through electoral and parliamentary politics.

The JVP's transition to democratic politics did not bring much success in terms of parliamentary seats. In most instances, it remained a small opposition party. Its experiments with forming electoral alliances with the two main parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP), did not enable the JVP to secure its goal of being a 'third force' in Sri Lanka's dominant two-party system. The formation of a socially broad-based and ideologically non-dogmatic NPP in 2019 was the JVP leadership's response to this political



Jayadeva Uyangoda

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The political space for Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the National People's Power also flows from the impact of the 2022 'Aragalaya' or the citizens' protest movement

deadlock it repeatedly encountered.

Despite the NPP's participation in the presidential election in 2019 and parliamentary elections in 2020, it could secure only a little over 3% of votes and three parliamentary seats.

### Catalysed by two developments

The NPP's rapid rise to become a major political force, weakening the traditional UNP and SLPP, and successfully making claims to be the new ruling party in 2024 is a direct outcome of two developments. The first is the economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The second is the deep social and political crisis that exploded as the *Aragalaya* or the citizens' protest movement, of 2022.

Meanwhile, the management of the debt crisis since 2023 by the Sri Lankan government, by means of a harsh austerity programme as prescribed by the International Monetary Fund, created widespread social discontent and anger against the Ranil Wickremesinghe administration. People saw the new tax policies and the dismantling of the welfare programmes as policy measures that benefited the rich and the wealthy business classes while exacerbating the crisis of the economic survival of the poor and the middle classes.

Growing poverty, income inequalities and increasing social polarisation between the haves and have-nots have generated a clear shift in the people's political loyalties – away from the traditional elite parties. It is in this context that the NPP's reform proposals for a corruption-free and pro-poor government could secure a positive response in urban and rural electoral constituencies.

The political space for Mr. Dissanayake and the NPP to have emerged as a leading reformist political force so rapidly within two years had already been created by the *Aragalaya*. Its powerful slogan of 'system change' and the hopes it envisioned for a new generation of politicians, committed to eliminating corruption, cronyism and tyrannical government, fitted perfectly well with the NPP's agenda of reforming Sri Lanka's politics, political culture and practices of governance. Thus, Mr. Dissanayake's victory is a slightly delayed political outcome of the *Aragalaya*.

The NPP's rapid journey to become Sri Lanka's newest ruling party has also coincided with the consolidation of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB-United People's Force) as the leading opposition party. The combined presence of the NPP and the SJB in Sri Lanka's parliamentary and electoral politics signals the onset of a major transformation of Sri Lanka's political party system as well. The UNP, SLFP and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the three main political parties founded and managed by the political class of Sri Lankan elites, have been so weakened that they can remain only as small opposition parties.

Thus, the emerging frame of political

polarisation in Sri Lanka appears to be between the NPP and SJB – the SJB filling the space for a right-wing party caused by the decline of the UNP as a mass party.

### Getting down to business will not be easy

The new President will have a set of unusual challenges and tasks before him. Since he has only three Members of Parliament in Parliament, holding early parliamentary elections is a major imperative for the new President. To form his own government, the President is likely to form a caretaker cabinet. Headed by the President, the caretaker cabinet will have three other Ministers. The dissolution of Parliament is most likely to occur before or next week so that an election can be held ideally in late-November.

To consolidate his government, the new President will need a comfortable parliamentary majority, of over 113 MPs. The presidential election has clearly exposed a major lacunae in his electoral base. The NPP has a rather weak presence in the districts with sizeable Tamil and Muslim ethnic minorities. The fact that Mr. Dissanayake's victory has been ensured primarily by Sinhalese voters is an issue that demands early corrective action. Making the NPP ethnically pluralistic will enable the NPP government to be inclusive of all of Sri Lanka's ethnic and cultural communities, while also securing a clear parliamentary majority.

Two other tasks will test the resolve and capacities of the new President and his government. The first is about repaying the external debt while taking the country's economy back to the path of rapid growth, this time with social justice and equity as normative social goals. This will call for a re-working of the austerity programme which the previous government has agreed with the IMF. This is the only way to prevent the recurrence of social discontent and protests by vast sections of the affected people.

The second is about purifying public life and the culture of governance. Mr. Dissanayake won the presidency on the strength of hopes he had generated for a corruption-free system of government. Eradicating corruption is easier said in an election campaign than actually done after the election because corruption is a highly institutionalised, internationalised and sophisticated vocation. Yet, the issue of corruption will be a crucial test of the new President's political success as well as his credibility.

What the people seem to expect from the new President is a new beginning that will lead to a 'genuine change' (*saba wenasak*, in Sinhala). At the presidential election, Sri Lanka's people took the first major step in that direction by effecting an unusually radical change in who governs. It is now up to President Dissanayake and his NPP government to prove that they – representatives of the non-elite social classes – are better rulers and better democrats with greater sensitivity to people's expectations for 'genuine change'.

# The NCrF as a framework for well-rounded education

Cognitive inconsistency and axiomatic irrationality become evident when a few put forth the view that the spirit behind and the structural reforms advocated by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 are unsuitable. The NEP is a vision document that provides a broad contour of how education can be transformed in India while getting away from the clutches of the colonial mindset. The National Credit Framework (NCrF) is one of several transformative reforms that are derived from the NEP, providing a flexible template for educational institutions offering school, higher, vocational, and skill education. Using the NCrF, higher education institutions (HEI) can give a unified accumulation and transfer of credits across multidisciplinary education, including skill education. The NCrF is an enabling framework rather than a regulatory one.

### More flexibility for students

When HEIs adopt the NCrF, students can earn credits in various activities provided they undergo an assessment. The NCrF gives students the flexibility to earn credits from classroom teaching, laboratory work, Atal Tinkering Laboratories, research projects, assignments, tutorials, sports and games, yoga, the performing arts, music, handicrafts, social work, National Cadet Corps and National Service Scheme activities, vocational and skill education, minor and major projects, on-the-job training, internships, apprenticeships, and experiential learning. Providing flexibility and broad-based educational opportunities through the NCrF has unnerved some who are deeply rooted in the conventional ways of imparting higher education.

The position of those few who remain bafflingly immune to the dynamic and forward-looking nature of the NEP 2020 is inherently "problematic". Their dismissive attitude towards the curriculum changes based



Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar

Chairman, University Grants Commission and a former Vice-Chancellor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

The National Credit Framework (NCrF) aims to help higher education institutions balance vocational and skill training and knowledge-generating academic pursuits

on the NCrF shows their unwillingness to understand India's societal, technological, and educational needs. This is precisely why India's higher education system should steadfastly remain dynamic and relevant to the country's needs to avoid the risk of becoming obsolete.

In keeping with the inevitable rapid economic and technological changes, the NCrF aims to help institutions remain flexible and competitive. Keeping the current and future evolution of job requirements, there is only one solution – revise the curriculum so that it is in tune with the NCrF. HEIs should demonstrate their capacity to adapt to the evolving new situations by bridging the skill mismatch so that the career prospects of students are not hindered.

Any view that HEIs should remain the place for the sole purpose of training students only to become knowledge producers is an outdated and obstinate refusal to see the reality. In the modern world, HEIs, besides being havens of knowledge, must equip students with the skills and the competencies needed for emerging roles and self-employment. However, such a dual role is possible only when HEIs adopt the NCrF and allow students to pursue their academic and career goals.

### Continuous adaptation is the key

Let us not promote an elitist brand of higher education by not supporting reforms in higher education; these reforms are necessary for the democratisation of education and social equity. HEIs must continuously adapt and reinvent themselves in response to changing circumstances. Having a few hinder efforts in transforming higher education in HEIs can lead to a stagnation and compromise the effectiveness of our institutions.

The NEP 2020 also advocates the multidisciplinary education and research university (MERU) concept. The focus of such

HEIs would be to serve as nurseries for scholars and intellectuals. However, such universities should not be considered an end in itself, and many other HEIs should also focus on vocational and skill training to enhance the employability of students.

When students acquire practical skills and knowledge through a flexible curriculum – as envisaged in the NCrF – higher education will become a tool for students to increase their social mobility. Those opposing structural changes in higher education advocate fossilised pedagogical approaches that do not align with the new economic realities and social aspirations.

### On vocational and skill training

Depending on the nature of HEIs, institutions can lay emphasis on vocational and skill training, focus on fundamental research, innovation, and intellectual pursuits, and ensure that knowledge production and skill training coexist as deeply interconnected processes. The bottomline is that those who acquire vocational and skill training can be as impactful as those who produce new knowledge. Therefore, there is no need to fallaciously overemphasise or deride one over the other as both are important.

The primary objective of the NCrF is to help HEIs balance vocational and skill training and knowledge-generating academic pursuits so that HEIs play a pivotal role in shaping individual futures and societal progress.

We must reimagine our higher education curricula by integrating flexibility and multidisciplinary and skill-based courses to transform India into an economic powerhouse and technological leader. Those who oppose this flexibility in higher education curricula and insist that universities should become elitist only show their unreasonable and outdated view.

The views expressed are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Israeli strikes

Israel's attack on Lebanon, killing hundreds of innocents including women and children, is shocking. Tel Aviv seems emboldened by an indifferent world to unleash attacks on the pretext of self-defence. With the superpowers preferring to wait and watch, the UN is

turning out to be practically ineffective.

**K.S. Venkitachalam,**  
Kalpathy, Palakkad, Kerala

### The leprosy fight

Leprosy, a long-lasting infectious disease, if not detected and treated early, leads to disability. It is still prevalent. But Jordan has

become the first country globally to have eliminated leprosy – a momentous achievement that was confirmed by the World Health Organization on September 19, 2024.

Jordan's success is the result of years of public health campaigns, early detection, free treatment

and community education. Its achievement spells hope for the rest of the world to

put an end to this stigmatised ancient affliction. India has to learn

### Corrections & Clarifications

The ninth paragraph of a report, "A battling Bhui and Shreyas take India-D to a strong position" ("Sport" page, September 22, 2024) erroneously mentioned Saurabh Kumar to be an off spinner. He is a left arm orthodox spin bowler.

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from Jordan even though it is free from this disease according to WHO criterion – less than one case per 10,000 population. But the existence of the disease in the population in small numbers is a public health challenge.

**Dr. V. Purushothaman,**  
Chennai

# Navigating cross-border insolvency

The adoption of cross-border insolvency laws is vital to international trade. Integration of cross-border regimes into a nation's legal ecosystem is considered the hallmark of sound insolvency laws. Besides providing legal certainty, they also improve the health of trading entities with cross-border operations, thereby benefiting investments and international trade.



**Amol Baxi**

Visiting Fellow at Research and Information System for Developing Countries, New Delhi. Views are personal

insolvencies. These have been seen as ad hoc and inadequate. In parallel, in the last few years, India has been executing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Comprehensive Economic Corporation Agreements (CECAs), Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) and their equivalents. As per the Commerce Ministry, India has signed such agreements with more than 54 countries. The Ministry describes FTAs as arrangements between countries to reduce or eliminate tariff /non-tariff barriers on substantial trade with the scope of covering areas such as intellectual property rights (IPRs) and investments. Similarly, CECAs/CEPAs are described as more integrated agreements on goods, services, and investments while including broader areas such as trade facilitation and cooperation. Therefore, examining how these agreements capture insolvency is relevant.

**Insolvency provisions** However, despite growing FTAs/CEPAs and their importance to trade, they lack detailed cross-border insolvency provisions. While FTAs are relatively limited in scope, CEPAs/CECAs are said to be "more ambitious and look at deeper regulatory aspects of trade" (Commerce Ministry). However, in their present form, most contain only general disputes or trade remedy clauses. It can be argued that FTAs facilitate trade, which leads to calls for cross-border insolvency laws. However, such laws are a vital ingredient of international trade, and relevant clauses need integration in agreements, pending the adoption of any harmonised law.

As regards the Model Law, while well recognised, the ground-level verdict is not out on whether it is the optimum solution, easily implementable in countries with diverse economic/legal regimes. There have been alternate perspectives from some scholars, noting that international treaties, frameworks,

and protocols can be tailor-made to address individual cases. These may be effective while complementing the existing system.

After signing four new FTAs (2021-2024), India is working on similar agreements with several nations (Economic Survey, 2024). Hence, pending adoption of Model Law, there is little reason why such FTAs cannot cover insolvency. There can be complementary integration of cross-border provisions in FTAs /equivalents. In their present form, these agreements capture disputes, IPRs, and even sustainability, but mostly ignore insolvency. If CECAs/CEPAs are conceptualised to capture deeper regulatory aspects, why can they not cover insolvency dimensions?

Interestingly, the vacuum is not found only in bilateral/regional agreements but even in some important World Trade Organization reports, which omit an explicit discussion of cross-border insolvency while discussing factors influencing the future of trade. Thus, there is a need to integrate perspectives on the importance of insolvency laws with global trade in multilateral or bilateral routes. Specifically, FTAs are incomplete without cross-border dimensions.

Therefore, there needs to be a more ingrained appreciation of the importance of sound insolvency laws for international trade. FTAs (and their equivalents) need to factor in appropriate mechanisms to weather the consequences of insolvency of trading entities. This would only strengthen the edifice of FTAs being signed by India. This may also form part of the government's agenda of framing SOPs for FTAs. While the practical feasibility of interlinking insolvency with FTAs is best assessed by the Commerce Ministry, the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board, and legal experts, considering the reality of insolvency with cross-border ramifications, the sooner these issues are addressed, the greater the benefits to India's trade.

There is a need to integrate perspectives on the importance of insolvency laws with global trade in multilateral or bilateral routes

**Implementing the Model Law** The debate on implementing harmonised laws to deal with cross-border insolvency has, therefore, been active. Since the late 1990s, the UN Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) has endeavoured to implement its Model Law developed on four pillars (access, recognition, cooperation, and coordination) across nations. Its potential benefits have been recognised in several countries, including India, by the Bankruptcy Law Reform Committee while drafting the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016, as well as the Indian government (Economic Survey, 2022).

However, progress on the adoption of the Model Law has been slow. As per UNCITRAL, only 60 countries have adopted it. Further, there have been variations in its implementation (given its non-binding nature), with nations tailoring the same to their requirements by including reciprocity/public policy exceptions clauses.

India is also yet to adopt the Model Law despite several committee recommendations on the subject. As per reports, a decision on the same has been likely deferred again. The Union Budget, while in support of improving the IBC's efficiency through technology platforms/augmenting judicial infrastructure, was also silent on this issue. At present, India relies on limited provisions, which allow bilateral agreements on a case-by-case basis for cross-border

# From optics to delivery

Making pre-poll guarantees is not enough; accountability is important

**STATE OF PLAY**

**Sowmya Kidambi**  
**Nikhil Dey**



In recent Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, the Congress effectively used the language of 'guarantees' to emphasise delivery of its social sector promises. This perhaps pushed the BJP to offer promises saying they were 'Modi ki Guarantee'. Eventually, the use of this language of 'guarantees' boils down to the citizens' quest for effective delivery. In Telangana, the guarantee of transparency, effective delivery, and accountability has become a focus of attention of the State government and the people. It is clear that launching schemes and budget provisioning is only half the story.

In December 2023, the Congress won the Assembly elections in Telangana. It replaced the BRS, which had been in power for more than nine years. The BRS, which claims credit for giving birth to the State, lost for many reasons. The most glaring was the distance that had developed between the people and the administrators. This was symbolised by a lack of transparency, accountability, and the failure to develop grievance redress mechanisms.

The Congress gave confidence to the people that its government would be a people's government and that there would be 'praja palana' (people's rule). The optics of this were quickly achieved by re-naming Pragati Bhavan, the camp office of the Chief Minister, which was previously seen as the symbol of unaccountable power, as Jyothirao Phule Praja Bhavan. It was opened to the public for the first time. As it rolled out the Praja Palana schemes, aided by desks to ac-

cept applications for its six pre-poll guarantees, and also promised to sort out grievances in a time-bound manner, the Congress government received immediate praise.

However, for any government to successfully implement its pre-poll promises, a robust, transparent, and effective mechanism of citizen monitoring is required, where a person applying can track the status of their application and have any related grievance redressed. A public hearing in Hyderabad on August 9, organised by a cross-section of citizens groups examining the long tale of unresolved grievances in the State, revealed how well-intentioned programmes can get mired in inertia and lead to dissatisfaction. A subsequent dialogue with senior officers dealing with public grievances in the State (Prajavani) and the Praja Palana platform revealed systemic shortcomings. This dialogue, followed by a meeting with the Chief Minister, has raised hope that a systemic solution will be found including the recording of grievances (with dated receipts); public facing digital tracking systems monitored by a team at the Chief Minister's Office; regular mandal-level public hearings; designated grievance redress officers for time-bound 'action taken' reports; and appellate mechanisms including provisions for penalties and compensation.

People need full and easy access to all information. The

previous regime was hostile to the Right to Information Act (RTI), 2005, and proactive disclosure. Despite its publicised open data portal, most data sets are hidden behind administrative logins and are accessible only to the government. In fact, no Government Orders were put out in the public domain after 2014, undermining the first step of transparency in governance.

A party instrumental in passing the RTI Act needs to reclaim and build on its legacy. Section 4 (suo moto disclosure) of the Act needs to be implemented in letter and spirit in the State. One of the finest examples of a truly transparent mandatory and open data portal is the flourishing Jan Soochna portal, developed together by the government and civil society in Rajasthan, during Ashok Gehlot's tenure. This has since been adopted by the Karnataka government and is called Mahiti Kanaja.

However, democratic governance goes beyond transparency. It is acting upon every violation of promises made that delivers the message. People reward action, punish inaction, and want promises to be kept. Their expectations are high – expectations that this ruling party raised during its election campaign. To deliver on the expectations, the spirit of Praja Palana and Prajavani will have to be made an integral part of law and policy in the State. A social accountability law, modelled on the 2011 National Grievance Redress Bill, should be enacted immediately. It will change the verbal guarantees into 'guaranteed by law'.

*Sowmya Kidambi is former Director of Society for Social Audit, Governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Nikhil Dey is a social activist and a founder member of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*

# Gukesh and Arjun reach stratospheric heights

The performances by the Indian youth in the Chess Olympiad match those of all-time greats

**DATA POINT**

**Srinivasan Ramani**

India secured two gold medals – one in the open category and the other in the women's category – at the 45th Chess Olympiad at Budapest. This was not only the country's best performance at the most prestigious team event in chess, but it also featured some superlative individual performances. This article will focus only on the open section.

The Chess Olympiad has been played since 1927. For years, the erstwhile Soviet Union dominated the event and later Russia did. In terms of individual performances, the creative genius Mikhail Tal leads all players in win percentage (81.2%) among those who played at least four Olympiads for their federation in the open section (Table 1). Tal won five individual gold and two silver medals and helped the USSR win eight gold medals. His compatriot, former world champion Anatoly Karpov, who went on to represent Russia later, has a win percentage of 80.3% – three individual golds and six team golds. Garry Kasparov, reckoned to be one of the top three all-time greats, is listed seventh with a win percentage of 78.7% – three individual golds and eight team golds.

The above table only looks at the winning percentage and does not account for the strength of the opposing players. This is measured by the 'performance ELO rating' or ELOp, calculated based on the player's ELO rating and that of his opponent. ELOp data is available from the 1972 Olympiad.

When all the players for whom the ELOp is available in the open section in each Olympiad are ranked (Table 2), India's D. Gukesh stands out. His ELOp of 3056 is the best-ever performance by an individual in an Olympiad since 1972. Only those players who have played at least five games in a sin-

gle Olympiad have been considered for this list. Gukesh managed to score 9 points in 10 games on Board 1, which is the toughest. That is why the equally worthy performance of his compatriot, Arjun Erigaisi, on Board 3, earning him 10 points in 11 games, got him a slightly lower ELOp of 2968. Only Andrei Volokitin of Ukraine managed a better ELOp than Arjun, though he did so on Board 5, the lowest board, in the 2016 Olympiad. Other prominent players such as Kasparov (in 2002) and Vladimir Kramnik (in 1992) are also featured in this list.

Chart 3 plots the total games played by each player against their ELOp. Only players with an ELOp of 2500 and who have played 10 games or more are shown. If ELOp is considered across Olympiads (since 1972) and we try to find out the strongest-ever performance, Gukesh (currently World No. 5 in the ELO live ratings) and Arjun (World No. 3) stand out. However, they have only played in two Olympiads (21 and 22 games each). Kasparov played in 82 games across multiple Olympiads and registered a stellar ELOp of 2806 (only the third player to have an average above 2800). Kramnik's ELOp was 2787 in 90 games.

Gukesh's opponent in the forthcoming World Championship in Singapore, Ding Liren from China, might have had an underwhelming tourney in Budapest, but he still maintains an ELOp of 2783 in 46 games. World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen has borne the burden of leading a somewhat weak Norway team in the 68 games he has played and his ELOp of 2764 is underwhelming relative to his own ELO (2830 currently).

Other stellar ELOps are owned by the U.S.'s Fabiano Caruana (2752 in 79 games), Bulgaria's Veselin Topalov (2748 in 85 games), Ukraine's Vasyl Ivanchuk (2742 in 90 games) and the U.S.'s (and previously Armenia's) Levon Aronian (2738 in 97 games).

## The new and old kings of the Olympiad

The data for the tables and charts were sourced from OlimpBase and FIDE

**Table 1:** Players who played in at least four Olympiads are listed according to their winning % (top 10). In the table, Ind.: Individual

| Player      | Country | Olympiad | Games | % wins | Medals |       | Player      | Country      | Olympiad | Games | % wins | Medals |       |
|-------------|---------|----------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------------|--------------|----------|-------|--------|--------|-------|
|             |         |          |       |        | Ind.   | Team  |             |              |          |       |        | Ind.   | Team  |
| M Tal       | USSR    | 8        | 101   | 81.2   | 5,2,0  | 8,0,0 | D Bronstein | USSR         | 4        | 49    | 79.6   | 3,1,0  | 4,0,0 |
| A Karpov    | USSR    | 6        | 68    | 80.1   | 3,0,0  | 6,0,0 | G Kasparov  | USSR/Rus.    | 8        | 82    | 78.7   | 3,1,2  | 8,0,0 |
| T Petrosian | USSR    | 10       | 129   | 79.8   | 6,0,0  | 9,1,0 | A Alekhine  | France       | 5        | 72    | 78.5   | 2,2,0  | 0,0,0 |
| I Kashdan   | U.S.    | 5        | 79    | 79.7   | 2,1,2  | 3,1,0 | Matulović   | Yugoslavia   | 6        | 78    | 76.9   | 1,2,0  | 0,2,2 |
| V Smyslov   | USSR    | 9        | 113   | 79.6   | 4,2,2  | 9,0,0 | Paul Keres  | Estonia/Rus. | 10       | 141   | 75.9   | 5,1,1  | 7,0,1 |

**Table 2:** Top 15 performances in a single Olympiad (min. 5 games). Data only since 1972

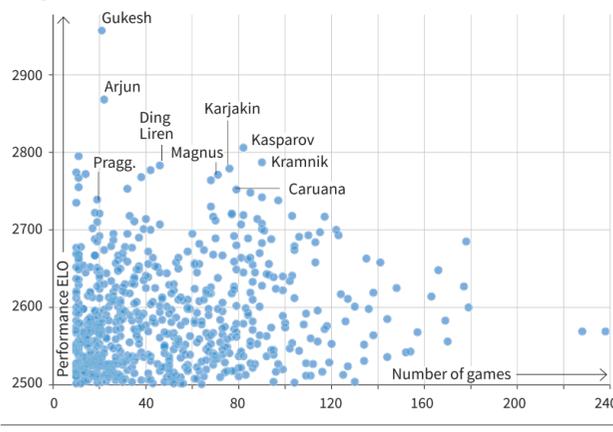
| Year | Board | Name (Federation)      | ELOr | Points | Games | ELOp |
|------|-------|------------------------|------|--------|-------|------|
| 2024 | 1     | D. Gukesh (IND)        | 2764 | 9      | 10    | 3056 |
| 2016 | 5     | Andrei Volokitin (UKR) | 2647 | 8.5    | 9     | 2992 |
| 2024 | 3     | Arjun Erigaisi (IND)   | 2778 | 10     | 11    | 2968 |
| 1992 | 1     | Vladimir Kramnik (RUS) | 2590 | 8.5    | 9     | 2958 |
| 2002 | 1     | Garry Kasparov (RUS)   | 2838 | 7.5    | 9     | 2933 |
| 2016 | 5     | Sami Khader (JOR)      | 2373 | 8      | 8     | 2932 |
| 2004 | 6     | Sergey Karjakin (UKR)  | 2576 | 6.5    | 7     | 2929 |
| 2016 | 1     | Baador Jobava (GEO)    | 2665 | 8      | 10    | 2926 |
| 2018 | 3     | Jorge Cori (PER)       | 2664 | 7.5    | 8     | 2925 |
| 2014 | 3     | Yu Yangyi (CHN)        | 2668 | 9.5    | 11    | 2912 |
| 1992 | 1     | Garry Kasparov (RUS)   | 2780 | 8.5    | 10    | 2908 |
| 2016 | 2     | Vladimir Kramnik (RUS) | 2808 | 6.5    | 8     | 2903 |
| 2022 | 3     | David W L Howell (ENG) | 2650 | 7.5    | 8     | 2898 |
| 2016 | 3     | Wesley So (USA)        | 2782 | 8.5    | 10    | 2896 |
| 2010 | 2     | Emil Sutovsky (ISR)    | 2665 | 7.5    | 9     | 2895 |

In table 1, medal tallies should be read in the following order: gold, silver, bronze. For instance, Anatoly Karpov won three golds, zero silvers and zero bronzes in the individual events. He was also part of six team golds

ELO ratings are used to measure a player's relative strength. The ELO system assigns a rating to each player, using the results of previous games. It adds weight based on the opponent's strength after each game

Performance ELO rating or ELOp is calculated based on the player's ELO rating and that of his opponent in that tournament. In this case, the Olympiad

**Chart 3:** Chart plots games played (minimum ten games) versus player's performance ELO rating (minimum of 2500)



**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

**The Hindu**

**FIFTY YEARS AGO** SEPTEMBER 25, 1974

## India and Portugal agree to establish ties

New York, Sept. 24: India and Portugal have decided to re-establish diplomatic relations, healing a rupture which had persisted ever since India became independent 27 years ago.

After a 90-minute meeting here to-day between India's External Affairs Minister, Mr. Swaran Singh, and the Portuguese Foreign Minister, Mr. Mario Soares, the two Ministers subscribed to a communique which said the two countries had agreed to hold in the immediate future meetings between their representatives aimed at implementing the agreement reached to-day to re-establish Diplomatic and Consular relations, and for concluding a cultural agreement.

The communique added that the new Portuguese Government, which had overthrown the remnants of the Salazar regime in Lisbon earlier this year, was ready to recognise the full sovereignty of India over the former Portuguese territories of Goa, Daman, Diu, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, which had become part of the territory of India following their liberation from the Portuguese colonial rule in 1961.

For its part India as in the case of the former French territories, has agreed to co-operate with Lisbon for the promotion of Portuguese language and culture and for the preservation of historical monuments in Goa and other former Portuguese possessions.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** SEPTEMBER 25, 1924

## Madras Telephone Directory

The Madras Trades Association having complained to the Madras Telephone Company Limited of errors in the current edition of the Telephone Directory, the Company wrote thanking the Association for calling their attention to the errors. They noted, however, that the errors were for the most part of the order of a comma instead of a full-stop or vice versa, and would not, therefore, prevent subscribers when consulting the Directory from obtaining the correct numbers. The Company agreed, however, with the Association that there should be improvement in the printing and promised to take such steps as they hoped would minimise all the errors of the type referred to by the Association in future publications.

# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Two-day death toll from Israeli strikes in Lebanon**

**588** Lebanon's Health Ministry said on Tuesday that the death toll from Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon over the past two days of escalation has reached 558, including 50 children and 94 women. AP

**Number of militants who laid down arms before Tripura CM**

**500** Tripura CM Manik Saha welcomed the militants belonging to the outlawed groups, the National Liberation Front of Tripura and All Tripura Tiger Force, in Sepahijala district. PTI

**Number of dengue cases reported in a week in Delhi**

**300** As per Municipal Corporation of Delhi's data from January till September 21, a total of 1,229 dengue cases have been reported. The city has also reported 363 malaria cases. PTI

**Number of 'illegal settlers' evicted from Assam forest land**

**2,000** About 450 families were evicted from 55-60 hectares of forest land in Goalpara district of Assam, an official said. This occurred as part of an eviction drive. PTI

**Number of people who crossed into Syria from Lebanon**

**500** Around 500 people crossed the border through the Qusayr and Dabousiya crossings to war-torn Syria, fleeing the Israeli bombardments. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Why the 'fact-checking' unit was invalidated

Why did the Bombay High Court strike down as "unconstitutional" the amended Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021? What did the amended rules ask of social media intermediaries? How did the Supreme Court intervene in the matter?

## EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

### The story so far:

In September 20, the Bombay High Court struck down as "unconstitutional" and "vague" the amended Information Technology (IT) Rules, 2021, which empowered the Centre to establish a "Fact Check Unit" (FCU) to identify "fake or false or misleading" online content about the government and its establishments. Justice Atul Sharachchandra Chandurkar delivered the verdict as the "tie-breaker" judge after a division Bench comprising Justices G.S. Patel and Neela Gokhale pronounced a split verdict in January, 2024.

### What was the law under challenge?

The Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) introduced the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023 (2023 Rules), amending the 2021 IT Rules.

This amendment vested the Union government with the authority to establish a fact-checking body empowered to classify any information "pertaining to the business of the Central government" as "fake, false, or misleading".

The amended Rule 3(1)(b)(v) specifically required social media intermediaries to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent users from uploading or transmitting any content flagged by the Centre's FCU as misinformation. Such flagged content would have to be taken down within 36 hours if the intermediaries wanted to retain their "safe harbour" protection – a form of legal immunity against any third-party content hosted by them. Within a week of their notification, the constitutional validity of the 2023 Rules was challenged before the High Court by Kunal Kamra, a political satirist and standup artist, the



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Editors Guild of India, and the Association of Indian Magazines.

### What did the split verdict stipulate?

Justice Patel opined that the amended rules promoted censorship and did not fall within the ambit of reasonable restrictions permitted under Article 19(2) of the Constitution. He underscored that the absence of procedural safeguards or guidelines effectively made the Union government a "judge in its own cause". In contrast, Justice Gokhale reasoned that the government is best positioned to provide accurate information about itself and that the rules were intended solely to combat misinformation, without restricting legitimate criticism or political satire. She also dismissed allegations of bias by asserting that the mere fact that the FCU members were appointed by the

government did not undermine their independence.

### Did the Supreme Court intervene?

Following the split verdict, the Chief Justice of the High Court appointed Justice Chandurkar to hear the matter afresh and deliver a tie-breaking ruling, in accordance with the High Court rules. Subsequently, the petitioners filed applications seeking an interim stay on the notification of the FCU until the matter was finally adjudicated. However, Justice Chandurkar dismissed these applications on the ground that no *prima facie* case was made out to stall the establishment of the body.

On March 20, 2024, the Centre notified the FCU under the Press Information Bureau (PIB). However, the very next day, the Supreme Court stayed the operation

of the notification until Justice Chandurkar took a final call on the validity of the amended rules. It reasoned that the challenge raised "serious constitutional questions" relating to the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression.

### What did Justice Chandurkar rule?

Endorsing Justice Patel's view, Justice Chandurkar observed that the amended rules suffer from manifest arbitrariness and sought to impose restrictions on freedom of speech and expression beyond those defined under Article 19(2) of the Constitution. He noted that the expressions "fake, false or misleading" within the rules are "vague and overbroad", leaving ample room for potential misuse.

Highlighting that there was no clarity on how the FCU would identify any information to be patently false or misleading, the judge asserted that the "exercise would result in an unilateral determination by the executive itself". He also refused to accept the Centre's claim that the Rules would exclude political comments and satire by reasoning that "any assurance from one Government even if carried out faithfully would not bind a succeeding Government."

Notably, Justice Chandurkar observed that the mere ability of an aggrieved person to challenge FCU decisions in a constitutional court could not be regarded as an adequate safeguard. He accordingly concluded that the amended rules were liable to be struck down, as they created a "chilling effect" on intermediaries by jeopardising their safe harbour protection.

### What happens next?

The Union government is likely to appeal the decision before the Supreme Court especially since the 2021 IT Rules are currently under challenge before the Delhi High Court and the Madras High Court. The ruling will also impact the legitimacy of similar fact-checking units established in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

## THE GIST

The amended Rule 3(1)(b)(v) specifically required social media intermediaries to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent users from uploading or transmitting any content flagged by the Centre's FCU as misinformation.

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# What are retractions and why do they matter?

What is a retraction index? Why do researchers use potentially duplicated or manipulated work?

Atanu Biswas

### The story so far:

According to the 'Retraction Watch' database, an Indian scientist at an institute in Lucknow has racked up 45 retractions. It also states that another researcher at a university in Kolkata published 300 scientific papers in a year, which is nearly a paper a day and impossible. This individual had six papers retracted, which cover an array of disciplines including chemistry and virology. Paper retractions are becoming more common worldwide even as the research misconduct problem is worsening in India.

### What are retractions?

A retraction is a mechanism that kicks in when a scientific paper published in an academic journal is found to be so flawed as to merit being removed from scientific literature. The academic community is often understanding when a paper is

retracted for an honest error but much less forgiving when a paper is pulled because it contains deliberately manipulated material. For example, the case of John Darsee, a young Harvard University cardiology researcher, stunned the academic community in the 1980s. He had over 80 papers retracted for spreading "inaccuracies and falsehoods".

Scientific fraud is surprisingly endemic: the list with Darsee includes Jan Hendrik Schön, Brian Wansink, Hwang Woo-suk, and of recent Ranga Dias as well, among others. Even Nobel laureates are not spared. Gregg Semenza, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and winner of the 2019 medicine Nobel Prize, has had 12 papers retracted over potentially duplicated or manipulated images.

### How often are papers retracted?

Between 2020 and 2022, 2.5 times more papers were retracted than they were between 2017 and 2019. The reasons for retraction include plagiarism, editorial conflicts, image manipulation, and the

use of paper mills. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many publishers had fast-tracked the peer-review process for papers they received from scientists. As a result, some 10,000 papers had to be retracted in 2023 because of quality and/or data issues. The number was only around 1,600 in 2013. In 2023, a German neuropsychologist named Bernhard Sabel published the results of using a fake-paper detector he had built: he found that a third of 5,000 neuroscience papers published in 2020 likely had plagiarised and/or falsified content.

### What is the retraction index?

A journal's retraction index is the the number of retractions in a given time period multiplied by 1,000 and divided by the total number of published articles, according to a definition provided by scientists Ferric Fang and Arturo Casadevall in a September 2011 paper. They also showed that there's a greater chance of a paper being retracted from a high-impact journal than from a

low-impact one. 'Impact' refers to the impact factor: the average number of times a paper was cited in last two years.

### Why do scientists falsify papers?

Paper mills are enterprises that churn out fake or low-quality journal papers and sell them to scientists. Thousands of papers published in academic journals worldwide have been linked to Russian, Iranian, and Chinese paper mills.

One reason they're becoming more prevalent is because of research institutes' desire to improve their national and international university rankings, where the primary criterion is research output. In today's academic setting, one's paper count can determine one's chances of being promoted, securing grants and getting awards. PhD students are sometimes required to publish papers to graduate. This "publish or perish" culture encourages paper mills.

Misconduct makes scientists lose trust in one another and in literature. In a 2000 article in the journal *Nature*, H.N.J. Arst wrote, "All honest scientists are victims of scientists who commit misconduct." Retractions are thus a way for science to correct its mistakes.

Reducing the prevalence of misconduct is an open problem in research policymaking. It needs to answer questions like: can journals detect bad papers with AI and what is a way to evaluate research quality over quantity?

Atanu Biswas is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.

## THE GIST

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PULSE-CHECK

# How BMI is becoming an inadequate measure for health

BMI does not help a doctor understand the composition of the weight – how much of it is fat, and where the fat is distributed. Studies are now showing that BRI may be better at predicting health risks than BMI

Zubeda Hamid

Practically everyone who has gone to a doctor for a check-up has had their BMI or Body Mass Index measured. BMI calculators abound online and it has become a modern go-to quick check for one's health – financial services company Zerodha even announced, in 2022, an extra bonus for employees with a BMI of less than 25.

But how accurate is BMI in deciding how healthy you are now, or how healthy you will remain in the future? Increasingly, experts have arrived at the realisation that it is an imperfect calculation that has several limitations.

Therefore, the new buzz word is BRI or the Body Roundness Index. Devised by U.S. mathematician Diana Thomas, and first published in a 2013 paper, this index measures how round you are. "BMI is grounded by the assumption that bodies are like cylinders. But when I looked at myself in the mirror, I thought – 'I'm more of an egg than a cylinder.' And this is what led to devising the BRI" she says.

The mathematical formula for BRI is associated with body fat levels, and takes into account height and waist circumference. The scores usually range from 1 to 15, with those having very high scores or very low scores (of over 6.9 or under 3.4) considered at the most risk for illnesses.

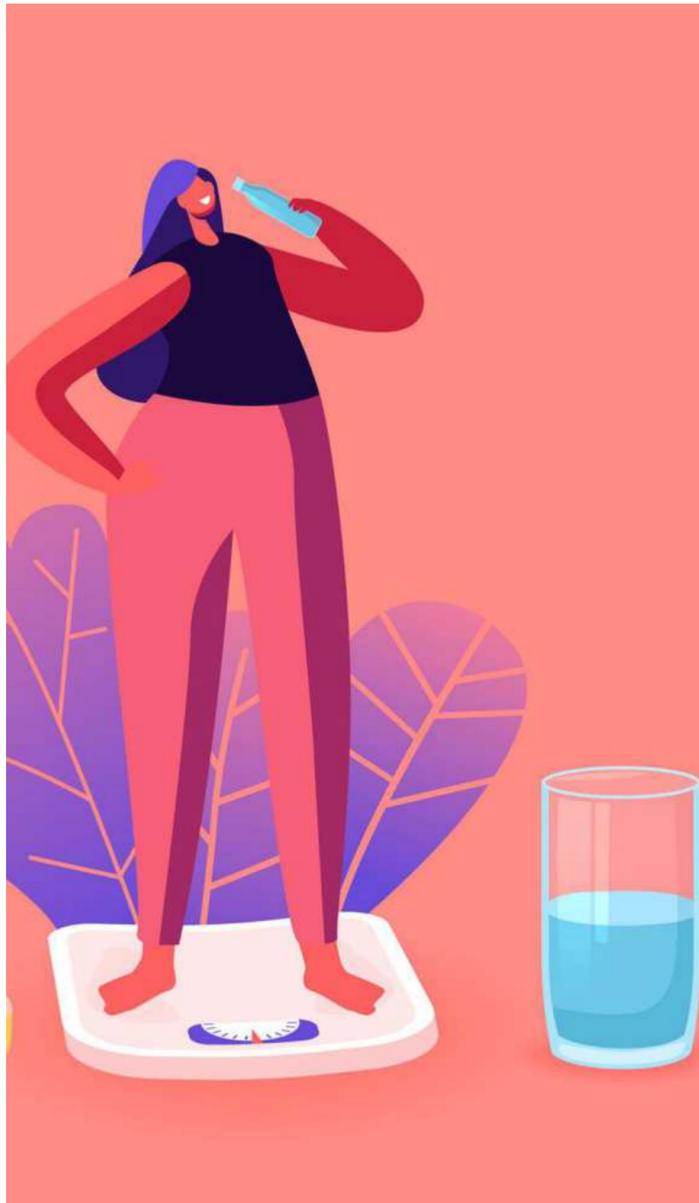
## How is BRI different from BMI?

BMI is your weight in kilograms divided by your height in metres squared. A BMI of 18 to 24.9 is considered normal; 25 to 29.9 is termed overweight and 30 and above is classified as obese.

The problem, says Jaichitra Suresh, chief medical officer, SIMS Hospital, Chennai, is that BMI does not help a doctor understand the composition of the weight: how much of it is fat, muscles or water for instance, and where the fat is distributed in the body. "Athletic people and those who do weight training may have high BMIs, as muscles are denser than fat, but will still be healthy. It cannot be assumed that a high BMI always means high fat," she points out.

BMI also has limitations with different ethnic groups – it was created using data from 19th century Europeans. For instance, Dr. Jaichitra says, an Indian and a Caucasian may have the exact same BMI, but in an Indian the fat percentage may be higher than that of the Caucasian.

How is BRI different? The BRI score takes the waist circumference into account, and calculates percent body fat: the calculator shows you an egg-like outline, with a green region, which is considered healthy. Scores outside this region are considered to be at risk. "The more round you are, the higher percent body fat you have, the higher your visceral adipose and therefore your risk of diabetes, cardiovascular problems etc. Metabolic illnesses can manifest without the body looking like it is obese. But even at the lower end, having a small body size for height, weight and gender, is a risk. The green zone shows you the sweet spot," says Dr. Thomas, who is a full professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point.



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## Where does the fat lie?

When BMI was first proposed to be used as an indicator for mortality risk, experts pointed out that its scores may not be applicable for the Asian population – and at this stage, in 2002, it was suggested that 23 be considered an action point for Asian populations, and not 25.

"But this," says Anura Kurpad, professor of physiology at St. John's Medical College who was part of the WHO expert consultation on BMI in Asian populations, which met in Singapore in 2002, "did not address the problem. It is not the amount of fat that is the issue but where the fat is – as fat in the abdomen, particularly when it accumulates around the internal organs, is what leads to metabolic syndrome and a host of medical issues. BMI can be misleading. You could be skinny but with a paunch and this would put you at risk of non-communicable diseases," he says.

High levels of visceral fat (belly fat stored deep within the abdomen, around the internal organs) can contribute to developing type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiac diseases and other health conditions. Indians are genetically predisposed to putting on weight around the abdomen making them more susceptible to insulin resistance, and therefore, diabetes. The guidelines released this year by the National Institute of Nutrition reflect this: they state that BMIs ranging from 23 to 27.5 are to be considered overweight for Asians, since they tend to have a higher percentage of body fat compared to some other populations.

Alternatives were proposed then, says Dr. Kurpad, who is also senior advisor, Tata Trusts, including waist-height ratios. This is a simple index: if your waist circumference is less than half of your height, you are in good shape, but if it is

more, then that indicates you are beginning to get spherical.

The problem of obesity is rising in India: according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), the number of overweight/obese Indian men is now 22.9%, while the figure for women is 24%.

But Dr. Kurpad points to another issue as well: "BMI gives the impression that it is only physically overweight or obese people who are at risk of chronic diseases. But this is not true – thin people are also at risk, as are children. In fact a national nutrition survey in children aged 5 to 19 found that one in two children studied had higher than normal blood glucose levels, high BP and higher than normal cholesterol," he says.

Even if adults or children are of normal weight, explains A.J. Hemamalini, professor and head of the department of clinical nutrition at the Sri Ramachandra Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Chennai, often, their fat mass is high and their muscle mass is low, and this is why BMI is not always an accurate indicator. "We look at different components including biochemical profile, waist circumference, waist to height ratio and correlate this with dietary intake and physical activity, to arrive at an idea of their nutritional status," she says.

## More reliable alternative

Many studies have now shown that BRI may be better at predicting health risks than BMI.

In a paper published in *Diabetology International* in July 2021, researchers from JIPMER Puducherry noted that BMI's clinical utility is challenged by its "inability to discriminate between fat and lean mass and failure to report the fat distribution." The paper, "Cut-off values and clinical efficacy of body roundness index and other novel anthropometric indices in identifying metabolic syndrome and its components among Southern-Indian adults," by Chiranjeevi Kumar Endukuru et al, which studied 202 individuals, found that BRI, among other novel measures, had a "significantly higher predictive capacity to identify MetS (metabolic syndrome). Among traditional and novel anthropometric indices, the paper said, BMI and ABSI (a-body shape index) "exhibited the weakest predictive power to identify MetS in both genders."

A recent cohort study of over 32,000 U.S. adults, 'Body Roundness Index and All-Cause Mortality Among US Adults' published in *JAMA Network Open*, found that the "association between BRI and all-cause mortality followed a U-shape, with both lowest and highest BRI groups experiencing significantly increased risk of all-cause mortality," indicating that "BRI may be promising as a newer anthropometric measure associated with all-cause mortality."

But how reliable is BRI? It may be subject to human error. Writing for *The Conversation* last year, Alice Bullas, Senior Research Fellow, Sports Engineering Research Group, Sheffield Hallam University, said one study had found that eight out of 10 trained health professionals demonstrated such high levels of human error when manually measuring the abdomen that they failed to notice an increase of 3 cm the second time they took the measurement. "This margin of error will probably be even higher in people taking their own measurements at home," she wrote, adding that as a new metric, BRI also does not yet have the kind of extensive data backing up its use that exists for BMI.

While BMI, BRI and other indices to measure health risks may continue to be debated for some time to come, it's a good idea, says Dr Kurpad, for everybody to use the simple waist to height calculation to keep track of their health.



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know your English

K. Subrahmanian Upendran

"What happened to your leg?"  
"Remember that bench in our garage?"  
"Who can forget that old thing! Why, it must be as old as your grandfather."

"Older, actually. That bench belonged to his father."

"Then it's an antique. You can make a lot of money if you sell it."

"That's not possible now. You see, I fell on the bench this morning and it broke into pieces."

"Aha! So you are bankrupt, are you?"  
"Bankrupt? Nobody becomes bankrupt because of a broken bench."

"But they do."

"What's got into you? How can we possibly become bankrupt because of a broken bench?"

"Because the word bankrupt literally means 'a broken bench'."

"What! 'Bankrupt' means 'broken bench'? You must be joking."

"No, I'm not. You see, the word 'bank' is derived from the old Italian 'banca' meaning 'bench'."

"But what's the connection between a bank and a bench? I don't see any."

"You don't see any connection, because when you think of a bank these days, you immediately think of a crowded building with a lot of counters. But when banking first started, business wasn't conducted in a building."

"Then where? Out in the open?"

"Exactly. Business was conducted on a 'banca', that is, a bench. The earliest moneychangers used to sit on a bench and all transactions used to take place on the bench. So the 'banca', from which we get the modern 'bank', became the place where monetary transactions took place."

"I see. And how did these moneychangers become bankrupt?"

"That's simple. When the bench broke, they became bankrupt."

"How did the bench break?"

"Usually, it was the money changer's enemies who broke it and sometimes it was his clients who did the breaking."

"Why did the clients break the bench?"

"Maybe they didn't like the service he was giving them. Or maybe they found out that he was cheating them."

"Well, if he was cheating his own clients then the bench deserved to be broken alright."

"You're right. And once the bench was broken, the moneychangers became bankrupt. Because you see, without the bench he couldn't transact any business. 'Rupta' is the Latin word for 'broken'."

And as I said earlier, 'bankrupt' means 'broken bench'."

"So without a bench to sit on, the bankers couldn't carry on any business."

"That's right. But there were some people who used to stand on a bench and conduct business."

"Stand on a bench and conduct business! Who were they?"

"Mountebanks. Know who a mountebank is?"

"Isn't he a fraud?"

"That's right. A mountebank is a person who goes around deceiving people by claiming he can do wonderful things. He is a swindler. The word is rarely used these days."

Published in *The Hindu* on June 22, 1993.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

The American sitcom *Friends*, which went on to become a major cultural masterpiece, debuted on September 22, 1994. Here is a quiz on the show that turned 40 recently

Sindhu Nagaraj

### QUESTION 1

When the show was first being developed, what were the initial titles, after which it was changed to *Friends*?

### QUESTION 2

Which of the six characters on the show had a pet monkey in the first couple of seasons? What was the name of the monkey?

### QUESTION 3

Courtney Cox played the role of Monica Geller on the show. Initially, the makers wanted her to take the role of which character?

### QUESTION 4

What is the name of the show in which Joey portrays the role of Dr. Drake Ramoray?

### QUESTION 5

The series was nominated for 62 Primetime Emmy Awards, winning six. Who were the only two main cast members who won an Emmy? Who is the only actor who was not nominated?

### QUESTION 6

The show is quoted in this tennis player's autobiography. The said player was dating one of the guest actors, Brooke Shields who appears in the episode 'The One After The Super Bowl - Part 1'. Name the tennis player and his book.



**Visual question:** Identify this actor, who had a guest role on *Friends*, playing the love interest of Phoebe Buffay. He was married to one of the show's main actors. Who was it?

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

1. This player registered the first medal winning performance for India in the Chess Olympiad. **Ans: Mohammad Rafiq Khan**

2. Name the Grandmaster who holds the record for representing India in the most number of games in the open section of the Chess Olympiad. **Ans: K. Sasikiran**

3. Name the only player to have beaten D. Gukesh in the Olympiads. **Ans: Nodirbek Abdusattarov of Uzbekistan**

4. This Indian player registered the second highest ELO rating in the Budapest Olympiad. **Ans: Arjun Erigaisi**

5. The 2014 Indian team won bronze in the open section. This Indian GM had the best performance rating from this team. **Ans: S.P. Sethuraman**

**Visual:** Identify these three chess players. **Ans: The Khadilkar sisters – Rohini, Vasanthi, Jayashree**

**Early Birds:** Nobody got all the answers correct

Please send in your answers to [dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in](mailto:dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in)

## Word of the day

**Patently:** unmistakably

**Synonyms:** obviously, plainly, apparently, manifestly, evidently

**Usage:** *His claims were patently false.*

**Pronunciation:** [newsth.live/patentlypro](http://newsth.live/patentlypro)

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /pə'tentli/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Text & Context'

the hindu **businessline.**

WEDNESDAY - SEPTEMBER 25, 2024

## Kings and queens

India stamps its authority on the global chess stage

India's Hungarian triumph has been hailed by many as a pivotal moment for chess in the country. For years, the sport relied almost exclusively on the genius of Viswanathan Anand for sustenance. But 2024 has changed everything. Walking through the doors pushed open by Anand, India's next-gen is charting ways to command chess the way the country has never done before.



Clearly, the scale of the achievement has not sunk in for many. Going into the 45th edition of the Chess Olympiad in Hungary, it was expected India would bring home a medal or two, as it was seeded first and second in the women's and open section, respectively. However, both the Indian teams went beyond expectations by bagging maiden gold medals in both divisions and in four individual boards. India also retained the Gaprindashvili Cup, the trophy awarded to the nation with the best overall performance. India's double title win in Budapest is a sporting achievement on par with any for the country, considering the Chess Olympiad is the pinnacle of the sport in a team format. What also stood out was the emphatic nature of India's win, particularly in the open section. The team – consisting of D Gukesh, R Praggnanandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi, Vidit Gujrathi and P Harikrishna – emerged unbeaten in the 11-round tournament, drawing just one tie, to Uzbekistan in the ninth round. India lost just one individual game out of the 44 it contested. India's near-flawless run was powered by World Championship challenger Gukesh, who won nine out of 10 games in the top board, securing the individual gold in the process. Also in the mix of things was Arjun Erigaisi, whose 10 wins out of 11 won him gold in the third board, while also lifting him to a career-high third in the FIDE live rankings.

The Indian women's team, playing without its top-ranked player Koneru Humpy, was stretched considerably more than its counterpart. Going into the final day, India was forced into a practically must-win situation to claim gold. But the side held its resolve as it dismantled Azerbaijan to evade the challenges of Kazakhstan and the USA to lift the title. India's title charge was driven by Divya Deshmukh and Vantika Agrawal. What unites both the Indian teams is their youthful composition. Of the 10 Indians to battle it out in Hungary, six are under 24, hinting at a potential for the country to dominate global chess for years. Gukesh is primed to take down China's Ding Liren and become the youngest World Champion. Arjun is a stone's throw away from breaking the 2800 ceiling in live ratings. Praggnanandhaa continues to claim prized scalps in big-ticket tournaments. Divya is ever so close to becoming the fourth Indian woman to attain the Grand Master title, months after Vaishali did so.

It is, however, unfortunate that India's assertion on the global chess stage has not been celebrated in the way that wins in other sporting events are. Prominent public figures seem to have given it a miss. The kings and queens of Indian chess deserve better.

## POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"I will get someone to help you. We shut the savings counter thinking no one will be able to use it these days!"

Merger norms:  
CCI's retrospective googly

**DEAL BLOCKS.** The new rules, by being retroactive, can raise compliance costs and disrupt earlier deals



VINOD DHALL  
GAURAV DESAI  
JUHI HIRANI

The Indian merger control regime recently witnessed a significant transformation with the introduction of a new set of regulations of the Competition Commission of India (CCI). These among other things bring in for the first time the much talked about deal value threshold.

Interestingly, and in a departure from past practice, these regulations apply retroactively to deals that have been signed, but not closed.

Whilst the intent behind introducing a threshold based on the value of a transaction was to exercise jurisdiction over mergers and acquisitions that might otherwise be overlooked, its retroactive application has sparked uncertainty in the regulatory landscape.

The implications of this move are far-reaching, affecting dealmaking timelines, established legal frameworks, market dynamics, and investor confidence.

Traditionally, significant changes to the Indian merger control regime have been applied prospectively, allowing sufficient time for businesses to adapt. For example, when combination regulations were first introduced in 2011, transactions approved or signed before the effective date were granted a safe harbour.

In fact, the CCI had taken a view then that for the first one year it would not commence gun jumping proceedings against any party that had concluded a deal without the CCI's approval. Similarly, when the long-form merger

filing format was revised in 2022, a one-month notice period was provided before the new Form II took effect.

Whilst the latest regulations do not provide a transition period, this is somewhat mitigated by the fact that the amendments were well-communicated in advance. The amendment process was extensively publicised with draft regulations released more than a year ago, and stakeholders had the opportunity to participate in consultations before the regulations were finalised.

Nevertheless, some interpretational issues remain, particularly concerning the deal value threshold, and detailed guidelines or FAQs would be helpful in clarifying these aspects.

The most concerning aspect of the new merger control regulations, however, is their departure from established practice by applying the new rules retroactively to deals that were signed but not yet consummated (either wholly or partly) before the regulations came into effect on September 10, 2024.

**IMPACT ON DEAL STRUCTURING**

The application of the regulations to deals signed before their enactment creates uncertainty for businesses. This will require parties to transactions that have already been signed to re-evaluate deals under the new regulations.

Such deals may also end up having to obtain regulatory approvals that were not initially anticipated. This is because

**Start-ups may find themselves in a limbo while awaiting regulatory approval, which can disrupt cash flow, plans, and threaten their survival**

transactions are negotiated with transaction documents, including conditions precedent such as merger control approvals, prepared according to the law in effect at the time of signing.

However, due to the retroactive application of the new regulations, deals signed before the regulations came into effect may need to be renegotiated to comply with the amended regulations, and the trigger document(s) may need to be amended.

This could lead to delays or even the cancellation of deals if the compliance costs are too high, or if the transaction is no longer commercially feasible under the new regime or with the revised timelines.

Start-ups, in particular, often rely on timely injection of capital or acquisition by larger firms to scale. If a transaction signed before the new regulations is subjected to retroactive review, it could delay the funding round.

Start-ups may find themselves in a limbo while awaiting regulatory approval, which can disrupt cash flow, strategic plans, and, in some cases, even threaten such start-ups' survival.

**IMPACT ON FOREIGN INVESTMENT**

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is critical for emerging markets like India, particularly in sectors such as technology, infrastructure, and manufacturing. Foreign investors often rely on regulatory predictability when making investment decisions.

Such retroactive application undermines this predictability as foreign companies may hesitate to enter the market or expand their existing operations in India, potentially creating a chilling effect on foreign investment and the ease of doing business.

Parties may look to insert protective clauses in transaction documents (such as material adverse change clauses) to

address regulatory risks, but this could complicate negotiations.

For the CCI, a retroactive application of the merger control regulations brings its own set of challenges. The CCI may face an upsurge in filings as parties rush to comply with the new filing requirements for deals that have already been signed.

This could place additional strain on the regulator's already limited resources, potentially leading to delays in processing.

To meet statutory timelines, the CCI might be compelled to invalidate a larger number of filings, which could, in turn, have a cascading effect on (the already extended) deal timelines.

In the light of these considerations, companies will need to invest in thorough due diligence and legal expertise to effectively navigate the complexities of the new framework. The coming months will likely witness an uptick in regulatory filings, along with broader questions regarding interpretational issues and the overall impact of these regulations on India's investment climate.

As India continues to refine its competition policy, it will be crucial to strike a fair balance between regulatory intervention in order to promote fair competition and maintaining a stable, predictable and certain regulatory environment for businesses. Achieving this balance is key to fostering both domestic growth and attracting foreign investment, and ensuring that India remains an attractive destination for business in the global market.

In the light of the above analysis, it may be desirable for the CCI to reconsider the retroactive application of the new deal value thresholds to deals already signed but not closed.

Dhall is former head of CCI; Desai is Partner and Hirani is Associate at Touchstone Partners, Delhi

## Bright days ahead for solar sector

More solar manufacturing clusters, global collaboration and greater thrust on skill development are needed

Sumant Sinha

As the 4th RE-Invest event in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, concluded, solar power took centre stage with significant commitments announced. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during the event, referred to India's solar revolution as a golden chapter in its renewable energy journey. RE-Invest 2024 saw major commitments from India Inc to increase the country's renewable capacity by 570 GW, with manufacturers pledging 340 GW of solar modules and 240 GW of solar cells.

Installed solar capacity has grown 30 times over the last decade, from 2.82 GW in March 2014 to 87.21 GW by July 2024, making India the third-largest producer of solar power globally. The country is expected to reach 280 GW of installed capacity by 2030.

India's solar manufacturing capacity is supported by policies like Performance Linked Incentives, non-tariff barriers, and ambitious targets. According to Mercom India, solar module and cell manufacturing capacity stood at 70.3 GW by December 2023.

planning and consideration are needed to address these concerns.

**Sriharsha R**  
Khammam (Telangana)

**Used-cars zoom ahead**

It is with reference to the news article 'Pre owned car market grows with dip in demand for entry-level cars' (September 24).

Two decades it was difficult to buy a pre-owned car. But in recent years pre-owned vehicles market in India has witnessed remarkable growth driven by factors such as affordability, accessible financing options, enhancement in vehicle quality and reliability and advancements in online platforms

for buying and selling used vehicles. As the present generation wants to travel in luxury cars they prefer pre-owned cars. Car companies should find a new strategy of exchanging old ones for new cars with modern facilities in reasonable price.

**P Victor Selvaraj**  
Palayamkottai (Tamil Nadu)

**Change in Sri Lanka**

The urge for change is palpable across geographies. Sri Lanka is the latest to ride the wagon. It was Bangladesh the other day and Pakistan is unable to put down Imran Khan's movement. Democracy has ever remained intangible in the saga of civilised human socio political discourse.

Nations, big and small, keep waging struggle towards socio-political resurgence and to redefine the sum and substance of a state's true well being. Popular movements could be transient, nevertheless these are vital to an evolving and impatient society.

**P Narayanan**  
Navi Mumbai

The resounding victory registered by the JVP-led coalition headed by Anura Dissanayake is a rejection of the dynastic politics and the status quo. Lankans opted for a man who has promised to root out corruption

with the US, EU, and other regions, leveraging their combined manufacturing expertise, technological advancements, and fiscal heft for maximum impact. A cooperative trade policy will help diversify and secure global supply chains for solar components.

(ii) **Skill development:** Advanced technical skills are necessary to facilitate the transition from module production to cell manufacturing and further upstream in the supply chain. India must foster robust government-private sector collaboration to launch comprehensive advanced manufacturing and R&D skill programmes, establish international talent exchanges, bolster industry-education partnerships, and encourage hands-on learning initiatives to fill the growing technical gap.

India has been a global front-runner in deploying and scaling up solar energy. The success of RE-Invest 2024, with strong participation from Indian and international stakeholders, reinforces India's leading role.

With the right steps, India is set to sprint ahead in the solar race, driving the world's clean energy transition.

The writer is Founder, Chairman and CEO, ReNew

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**Poll challenges**

India's 'One Nation, One Election' proposal aims to hold simultaneous national and state elections to reduce costs and improve governance stability. However, it poses several challenges, including risks to federalism, logistical difficulties, and potential disadvantages for regional parties. It could also lead to governance disruptions, require significant constitutional changes, and overwhelm voters. Additionally, it might divert attention from local governance issues. There is also a possibility of policy paralysis as parties would be occupied for a period in election campaigns. Careful

# TRAI authorisation rules

Implications of a shift away from licensing

TV Ramachandran

The Indian Telegraph Act of 1885 has stood inexorably tall and firm for 140 years, adapting smoothly to the many monumental changes in technology and environment.

However, there comes a time when the old order needs to change, and this was heralded by the Telecommunications Bill 2023, which proposes an epoch-making authorisation framework instead of licensing.

While examining the TRAI Consultations on Framework for Service Authorisations, certain honest doubts may arise such as: How will the present licensing regime for specific services transition into one where authorisations are issued for services? What would that framework look like? How would that framework affect the operations of the existing players and enable entry of new players? What kind of regulation is warranted for different kinds of telecom network and services? More importantly, how will these changes impact the ease of doing business, competition, and the long-term objectives of India's digital economy?

The naysayers say that the proposals are mere semantics with the term 'licence' getting replaced with 'authorisation', and this needs to be countered.

**STREAMLINE THE PROCESS**  
The new framework must replace the cumbersome licensing regime with a more streamlined process. However, it is crucial that the objectives of this new framework serve overall national priorities of inclusivity and Viksit Bharat.

The guiding principles that drive the rules should be lowering entry barriers, encouraging competition, attracting more investments, fostering innovation, and reducing regulatory and administrative costs.

The true advantage of the authorisation framework will lie in its potential to catalyse innovation by providing a more flexible and adaptive regulatory environment.

Telecommunication services that do not utilise scarce resources and are not public-facing should be provided automatic or "general authorisations", requiring entities only to notify the Central government.

Wherever possible, exemption from authorisation, as provided in the Act should be provided to



TELECOM. For a stable policy regime ISTOCKPHOTO

foster entry for new players, and innovation.

One of the proposals is that of merging different service authorisations into a single, unified pan-India authorisation. While this might appear to simplify business operations, it could have far-reaching implications that may not serve the best interests of the market or consumers. India's telecom sector thrives on specialisation, with companies developing expertise in specific areas. Merging these specialisations into a single authorisation could undermine this dynamic, reduce competition, lead to higher costs, limit consumer choice, and stifle innovation.

Importantly, Satcom Authorisations must be separate from Terrestrial Telecom Authorisations for several key reasons: Satcom utilises different technologies, is delivered differently to end-users using different customer devices and operates under unique terms and conditions. The Telecommunications Act 2023, clearly provides that spectrum for satcom services, like GMPCS and VSAT, must be assigned through an administrative process.

Further, within satellite services, there must be a clear distinction between Global Mobile Personal Communications by Satellite (GMPCS) and Commercial VSAT CUG Authorisations. GMPCS allows for voice, data, video, and messaging with connectivity to public networks, while Commercial VSAT CUG is limited to point-to-point data connectivity within a closed user group (CUG) without such connectivity.

The focus should be on creating a stable, predictable policy and regulatory environment that encourages both existing players and new entrants to innovate, invest and compete.

The writer is President, Broadband India Forum. Views are personal. Inputs by Sundeep Kathuria and Shubhika Saluja

# The perils of Trump's tariff hike plans

It will raise costs for US consumers, and wreck the entire global trading system



REUTERS

## THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARANJAY KUMAR

The US economy must have no challengers, says ex-president Donald Trump. And certainly not China. The only problem is his MAGA (Make America Great Again) strategy would involve slapping tariffs on virtually every product entering the US and potentially also destroy the global trading system.

India isn't a great trading nation but we'd certainly be hit even if only part of his plans became reality. (Trump called India "a very big abuser of tariffs" just before Prime Minister Modi left for his latest US visit).

For starters, Trump wants to slap 60 per cent duties on nearly all Chinese goods from computers (exports of over \$200 billion), semiconductor devices (\$29 billion) or non-knit women's suits (\$29 billion). He scoffs when economists tell him such moves would send prices soaring.

"When you take a hard look at the data, they really aren't worth it for jobs and they raise costs for consumers," says Biden Administration economist Kim Clausing. But Trump insists these moves will return jobs to the US and turn it into

a thriving, full-employment nation. Other friendlier trading partners might get off lighter with 10-20 per cent tariffs. Pushing tariffs to levels unseen since the 1930s, according to the Trump School of Economics, would bring in cash, make it possible to slash taxes and, thus, achieve the US extreme right's dreams.

For 200 years, Britain was funded by tariffs, the *Financial Times* notes, without endorsing the idea. Income and other personal taxes only began supplying significant revenue at the start of the 20th century. World War I sent UK taxes soaring from 6 per cent in 1914 to 30 per cent in 1918. In the US, top tax rates for the very rich were even higher post-war.

Many tax hardliners argue Nafta (North American Free Trade Area), which allows duty-free imports from Canada and Mexico, should also be torn up which would be devastating to both economies.

More importantly, Trump insists to voters in heartland manufacturing

**During the last Trump administration, the job losses from trade retaliation were higher than the job gains from tariff protection, economists say**

states who have lost employment due to imports, such moves would return jobs to the US.

Trump's arguments have found fertile ground among unions with traditional Democratic allies like the Teamsters refusing to endorse Kamala Harris. Even the Biden administration blames China for the loss of manufacturing jobs. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen raised temperatures in April by saying two million US manufacturing jobs had been lost since 2001 when China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO).

**BYPASSING WTO RULES**  
China is hitting back at the US by taking its case to the WTO. But in recent years, countries like the US have been paying little heed to WTO rules. Trump's tariff plans are the equivalent of showing two fingers to the WTO — and blowing the entire global trading system to bits.

There are some harbingers of what might happen if Trump raised tariffs through the roof. We just have to look back to the US 1929 Smoot-Hawley Act that hiked tariffs to 20 per cent on 20,000 items, the aim being to protect US farmers during the Great Depression. Inevitably, other nations hit back and US exports crashed by two-thirds between 1929 and 1932. Imports also cratered.

But, most importantly, unemployment doubled from 8 per cent

in 1929 to 16 per cent in 1931, aggravated by the Act's impact. It should be noted the Democrats are also in favour of tariffs, just more targeted, careful and strategic ones aimed at industries trading unfairly.

In fact, during the last Trump administration, the job losses from trade retaliation were higher than the job gains from tariff protection, economists say. Trump's latest plan would raise costs for an average family by at least \$1,700 a year, they say. Harris argues the effect of his tariffs could be as much as \$4,000 per household.

But Trump is intent on doubling down. In the US and right-wingers in Europe are desperately looking for ways to cut taxes while boosting jobs, while maintaining social services and standards of living.

Ex-British prime minister Liz Truss is making videos claiming her disastrous tax-cutting budget was the right move at the right time and would have changed the direction of the country's economy if she hadn't been summarily turfed from office.

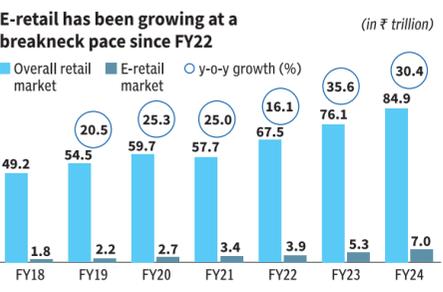
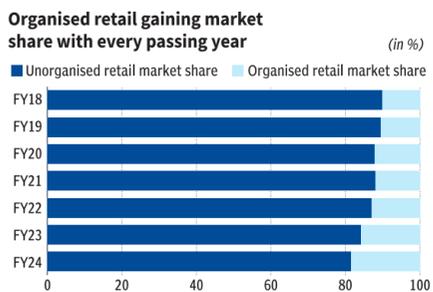
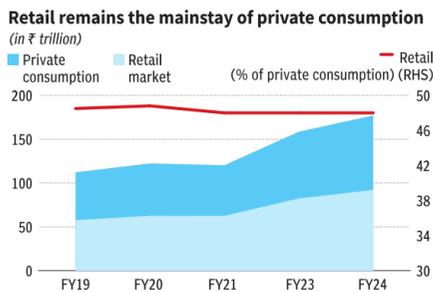
But it's the battle between the US and China that will determine the direction of the global economy in the coming years. India has discovered it's tough to keep the economy chugging along without Chinese products. If Trump becomes president and tries to slap huge tariffs on Chinese products he may make the same discovery.

## STATISTALK.

Compiled Arun K Shanmugam | Graphic Visveswaran V

### How the Indian retail industry is growing and transforming

Retail has stayed firm at around 48 per cent of private consumption expenditure which is on an increasing trend. Apparel and apparel accessories stand to be the fastest growing segment within retail. While the segment is largely unorganised, the penetration of organised players has been on the rise with a significant jump since FY23. Also, the e-retail segment has been growing at a fast pace with >30 per cent y-o-y growth in FY23 and FY24



## thehindubusinessline.

### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 25, 2004

#### Corporation Bank to explore acquisitions

The Mangalore-based Corporation Bank is the latest to join the takeover bandwagon. The bank's board has passed a resolution authorising the Chairman and Managing Director to explore the possibility of acquiring other banks. The bank also wants to protect itself from any takeover bid.

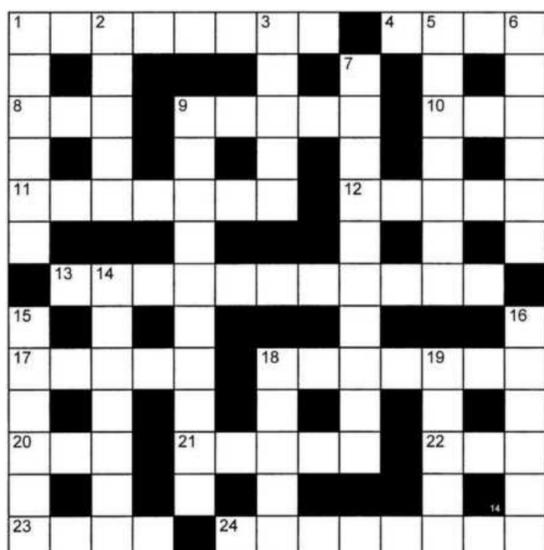
#### SC to hear Zee plea against BCCI decision

The Supreme Court will on Monday hear a writ petition filed by Zee Telefilms challenging the cancellation of the telecast rights awarded to it by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) between 2004 and 2008 and re-opening of the tender process. Since the BCCI has filed a caveat, the court will also hear its version before passing any order.

#### Govt rules out selling stake in Maruti Udyog

The Government ruled out selling its stake in Maruti Udyog Ltd, a day after Suzuki announced giving significant stake to the largest Indian car company in its new joint venture for cars and diesel engines. "We will not sell our stake in Maruti," the Heavy Industries Minister, Mr Santosh Mohan Dev, told PTI. Under the revised agreement Suzuki got majority 54.2 per cent stake in MUL.

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2533



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Become firm, set (8)
- Look lecherously at (4)
- Beam of light (3)
- Computer control (5)
- Emmet (3)
- Artist's colour-board (7)
- Jockey (5)
- Feigning sickness to avoid work (11)
- Professorship (5)
- Hold up, bear (7)
- Greek long 'e' (3)
- Was audibly aware (5)
- Pastry dish (3)
- Memorandum (4)
- Given a sudden fright (8)

#### DOWN

- Leather ties (6)
- Faithful (5)
- Barb of an anchor (5)
- Cheer one up (7)
- Complete, whole (6)
- Subjected to abject fear (10)
- Government by woman or women (10)
- Unyielding (7)
- Shield (6)
- To mean to (6)
- Dandified (5)
- Fill one with horror (5)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- It will set if so idly disposed (8)
- Make sheep's eyes at nothing, having broken leg (4)
- It sheds some light on the fish (3)
- What will army doctor employ for a black eye? (5)
- Soldier perhaps entering Cuban territory (3)
- Range of colours allowed in a pet composition (7)
- Who's up for an added corollary? (5)
- Avoiding work when lame, ringing the changes (11)
- Seat one took when cleaner was around (5)
- Keep it up as Tunis sorts it out (7)
- Letter shows when militant Basques are expected to come (3)
- Came to learn of it being right in the noddle (5)
- Sort of chart a speciality of Périgord (3)
- What musician will play for a tenner, say (4)
- Given a fright, begin to be guided by it (8)

#### DOWN

- Harness, parts of which turn up at top of stable (6)
- It's true one might get alloy out of it (5)
- It's the merest chance it will be found on an anchor (5)
- Make one happy to dangle it round desktop (7)
- How to enter one that's all there (6)
- Victim of violent threats was shown how Terriers do it (10)
- Where a woman is head of a march, I try it out (10)
- Won't yield a damn at its conversion (7)
- It shields one from the picture shown on it (6)
- Have it in mind to be at home to look after one (6)
- Burning sensation of being electronically controlled (5)
- It will horrify one to have a Laplander turn up (5)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2532

**ACROSS** 1. Pantheism 5. Cow 7. Ruby 8. Accolade 10. Identity 11. Fall 13. Grange 15. Moment 18. Drop 19. Fixation 22. Attitude 23. Peel 24. Eye 25. Warranted  
**DOWN** 1. Parting 2. Noble 3. Incite 4. Moot 5. Charade 6. Wheel 9. Stage 12. Local 14. Apostle 16. Tangled 17. Tinder 18. Drake 20. Inert 21. Stow

# A losing proposition

Odds are against individuals in F&O

A new study by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), titled "Analysis of Profits & Losses in the Equity Derivatives Segment (FY22-FY24)", suggests that trading in derivatives is a losing proposition. Brokerages and exchanges charge fees, which add to the transaction cost, and net of such costs, derivatives trading is a zero-sum game with every loss equating to commensurate gains for some counter-party. The study indicates 93 per cent of the over 10 million individuals who traded in derivatives (futures and options, or F&O) during the period under review incurred average losses of ₹2 lakh per trader (including transaction cost). The aggregate losses of individuals exceeded ₹1.8 trillion. The biggest losers, about 400,000 traders, suffered average losses of ₹28 lakh, including the transaction cost. In contrast, only 1 per cent of individual traders earned profits exceeding ₹1 lakh, after transaction cost.

In FY24, proprietary traders and foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) as classes booked gross trading profits of ₹33,000 crore and ₹28,000 crore, respectively (before the transaction cost), while individuals incurred losses of over ₹61,000 crore (before transaction cost). The profits were generated by trading algorithms, with 97 per cent of FPI profits and 96 per cent of proprietary profits arising from algorithmic trading. On average, individual traders spent ₹26,000 per person on F&O transaction cost in FY24. Over FY22 to FY24, individuals collectively spent ₹50,000 crore on transaction cost, with 51 per cent of such cost being brokerage fees and 20 per cent exchange fees. Around 43 per cent of individual traders are under 30 years, and about 72 per cent of traders live in places outside the top 30 cities. Also, the study claims over 75 per cent of loss-making individual F&O traders continued trading these instruments despite repeated losses.

Apart from ensuring that exchanges maintain transparent and fair trading processes, the regulator's mandate extends to investor education. Studies like this serve a valuable purpose in that regard. Derivatives trading is an extreme illustration of the Pareto Principle with 7 per cent of individual traders making profits while the rest lose. However, beyond clearly pointing out that F&O trading is a losing proposition for individuals, there is not much the regulator can do. Indeed, it has also attempted to protect under-capitalised traders by asking for a review of contract sizes and margins. Given this study, it's up to the individual to analyse their trading patterns and do the accounting. Smart traders will understand the implications and adjust trading strategies, or simply quit playing such highly leveraged markets.

From the institutional perspective, individual F&O traders serve an economic purpose. A comparison may be drawn with state lotteries. Every individual who buys a lottery ticket has an overwhelming chance of losing money and yet, in aggregate, participation generates useful revenues. A vibrant F&O market enables better price discovery, and participants can hedge more efficiently. In aggregate, traders help generate the volumes, which ensure high liquidity and low spreads. This is to the benefit of all traders, and especially useful for hedgers. However, retail traders would benefit from absorbing the lessons of this study at an individual level.

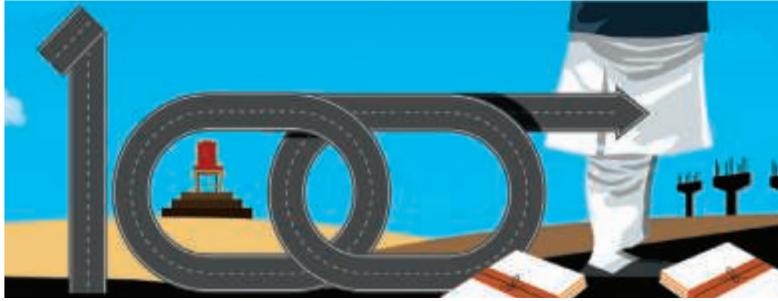
# A matter of fact

Media must raise the bar on verification too

The Bombay High Court's decision to strike down the central government's Fact Check Unit (FCU) offers a reassuring judicial confirmation of basic constitutional principles critical to the functioning of democracy in India. The 2-1 verdict underlined that the existence of such an institution violated fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, the right to practise any profession or occupation, trade or business, and the right to equal protection before the law. The verdict set out in no uncertain terms the impact of the FCU. It pointed out that judging information in terms of fake, false or misleading was "vague" and "overbroad", would have a "chilling effect" on freedom of speech, and was tantamount to censorship. The complex journey of this case reflects an encouraging exercise of judicial powers in defence of citizens' rights even as it reflects the intent of the Indian state to decide the nature of information that Indian citizens can receive.

The FCU came into being following an amendment to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, empowering the government to identify fake or misleading news pertaining to the business of the government (including ministries and public-sector units) on social-media platforms. Under the amendment, social-media platforms were required to take down news identified by the FCU as fake or misleading if they were to retain their legal immunity on third-party content they published. The rules were challenged in the Bombay High Court by standup comic Kunal Kamra, the Editor's Guild of India, and the Indian Association of Magazines on grounds of unreasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. On January 31, the two-judge Bench delivered a split verdict, requiring the matter to be referred to a third judge. This was done in February, but the judge concerned declined to stay the establishment of the FCU until he delivered his final opinion. In response, the government moved swiftly to notify the FCU under the Press Information Bureau (PIB) in March. The PIB described the measure as "pro-active", with the FCU to be headed and staffed by Indian Information Service officers, who could take *suo motu* action or consider third-party complaints. In the same month, the petitioners moved the Supreme Court to stay the FCU, which was duly granted on the grounds that the petition raised serious constitutional questions. The tie-breaking judgment underlined the criticality of these questions.

Though the Bombay High Court verdict has reinstated the principles of freedom of information — and opinion — the fact that the government considered a bureaucrat-run fact-checking institution suggests that scrutiny of the media in some form or the other is unlikely to abate. In a media industry as varied and rambunctious and political leaders becoming increasingly sensitive, it is possible that one person's fact would be another person's fake news. There is, of course, a strong case for politicians to develop the kind of approach that enables the standup comedy and opinion industry in vibrant western democracies to flourish. More practically, it would benefit the media to make the standards of fact-checking more rigorous. Editorial fact-checkers in reputed media outlets the world over insist that a fact is verified by at least two independent sources. This should become a gold standard so that variations of the FCU idea do not emerge again.



# Signals from 100-day achievements

Differences between 100-day celebrations in 2019 and 2024 point to a changed focus in governance

Last week, the Modi government celebrated its achievements during the first 100 days since its formation on June 9. How different were they from similar celebrations held five years ago after it was sworn in for a second consecutive term on May 30, 2019? Essentially, these celebrations led to a listing of major achievements in the first 100 days. Comparing them, therefore, will tell you how the nature of policymaking and the focus of governance in the early days have changed between what is commonly referred to as Modi 2.0 and Modi 3.0.

On top of the list of achievements publicised by the Modi government in 2019 was its decision on August 5 to declare Article 370 of the Constitution inoperative, extending the application of all Indian laws to Jammu & Kashmir and, thereby, ending the special status the state was enjoying. Converting the state into two Union Territories was another decision taken on August 6. This marked the fulfilment of a major political promise the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had made before the general elections.

By the end of July 2019, the Modi government secured Parliament's approval to the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, popularly known as the triple *talaq* Bill, which made oral divorce in one sitting illegal and a criminal offence. The Supreme Court had earlier declared such a procedure for divorce legally invalid. The Modi government's decision to frame this law was opposed by many, but this was one of the promises of the BJP and its government fulfilled that within the first 100 days in office in its second term.

Three other legislative changes also figured in the 2019 list of achievements. On August 1, amendments to the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) were passed by Parliament to strengthen provisions related to time limits for resolution of insolvency

cases, specify the minimum payout to operational creditors in any resolution plan, and mandate how representatives of a group of financial credits, such as homebuyers, should vote in resolution cases. These were significant amendments to the IBC, which for the first time set a time limit for resolving insolvency for both companies and individuals.

The other two legislative changes for which the government took credit pertained to the banning of unregulated deposit schemes and laying down procedures for evicting unauthorised occupants of public premises, including government houses. Among the achievements were also the government's action against fugitives and corruption in bureaucracy. About a dozen tax officials were made to quit and over 30 other tax department employees, charged with corruption cases, were dismissed. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's first Budget presented on July 5 did get covered, but in a rather cursory way as the list referred mainly to the large-scale investments in infrastructure and the social sector, in addition to outlining measures to improve the ease of doing business.

In contrast, the achievements in the first 100 days of Modi 3.0, which were listed last week, focused largely on the initiatives of Ms Sitharaman's Budget for 2024-25, which was seen as maintaining "strong fiscal support for infrastructure over the next five years, while balancing other priorities and fiscal consolidation." The list of other achievements included the launch of key infrastructure projects worth ₹3 trillion, including the construction of a deep-sea port at Vadhaven in Maharashtra, the expansion of major road networks, airport upgrades, and the development of metro projects. Reducing corporation tax rates for foreign companies, the abolition of the angel tax to ignite innovation, the launch of a ₹1,000-crore venture capital fund for space



RAISINA HILL  
A K BHATTACHARYA

# The time for private investment is now

buoyed up by a young and dynamic workforce, substantial government investments in infrastructure, strong financial sector balance sheets, and a globally acclaimed digital stack, India's growth outlook appears robust. The recovery witnessed following the Covid-19 pandemic has positioned the country as the fastest-growing large economy, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) expecting India to grow at 7 per cent in FY25.

However, given that private sector investment, especially in machinery, equipment, and intellectual property, has lagged in recent years, this recovery is incomplete. As noted in the latest Economic Survey, private sector gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) in machinery, equipment, and intellectual property products grew cumulatively by only 35 per cent during FY20-23. Meanwhile, its GFCF in "dwellings, other buildings, and structures" increased by 105 per cent during the same period.

Interestingly, during the same period, the share of private sector profits to gross domestic product (GDP) reached a 15-year high, as noted in the Economic Survey 2023-24. This growth in profits was largely financed by what was described as the "revenge consumption" of Indian consumers in FY21 and FY22.

Given that this increase in profits didn't translate into increasing value creating investment, one is forced to question — what has the private sector been doing with its cash?

We analysed the balance sheets of 2,341 listed manufacturing entities in India for the period FY17-FY23. Our analysis shows that the revenue generated by non-financial companies in the private sector dur-

ing FY20-22 was used to deleverage and clean up balance sheets. As one can see from the table (*From debt to growth*), the 26 per cent growth in revenue clocked in FY22 over FY20 was financed by debt. In fact, debt levels in FY22 were lower by ₹2.46 trillion compared to FY20.

This display of financial discipline augurs well for both India and the industry. By effectively navigating external shocks without increasing their reliance on debt, the private sector has been able to build robust balance sheets.

The stage is, therefore, set for the private sector to deploy capital and invest in growth, which will not only create employment, build capabilities, and improve efficiencies, but also drive consumption, and translate into better sales growth. We recommend two actions for companies to invest their profits.

1. Manufacturing companies must use the surplus to digitise the production value chain with the goal of efficiently designing, building and selling innovative products and services catering to the needs of the discerning Indian consumer.

2. In addition, such surpluses must be used to finance the deployment of various schemes outlined under the Employment Linked Incentive package in the FY25 Budget, aimed at building an employable manufacturing workforce.

Any further delay in reinvesting profits would slowly eat into the competitiveness of enterprises and the economy as a whole.

Despite softening inflation, the degrees of freedom for the central bank to reduce interest rates

startups, the approval of a five-year scheme to accelerate the tech startup ecosystem, and the rollout of BioE3 policy to foster high-performance biomanufacturing were among the listed initiatives.

There were also other achievements that Modi 3.0 took credit for. These included enhanced credit guarantee coverage for women-owned micro, small and medium enterprises, the establishment of 14 technology centres, a new centralised pension payment system to help 7.8 million individuals withdraw pension from any bank, new schemes for exporters and strengthening state milk cooperatives with the National Dairy Development Board entering cooperation agreements with them.

Interestingly, Modi 3.0 took credit even for the enforcement of the three new criminal laws from July 1 (even though they were passed by the previous government in December 2023), the One Nation One Election system (even though the Cabinet approved it a day after the 100-day mark and the challenges of securing a Constitutional amendment appear formidable) and the rollout of the decennial Census "soon". But there was hardly any celebration over the Cabinet's approval for the Unified Pension Scheme for government employees on August 24 to address concerns over the National Pension System.

The differences between the first 100 days of Modi 2.0 and Modi 3.0 are quite stark. Apart from the passage of the Budget in 2024, the Modi government in its third term did not pass any major legislation. The Waqf (Amendment) Bill had to be referred to a joint parliamentary committee. The draft broadcasting services Bill appeared to have been withdrawn, as more internal deliberations followed. In contrast, the Modi government in its second term had passed several politically and economically significant legislative Bills.

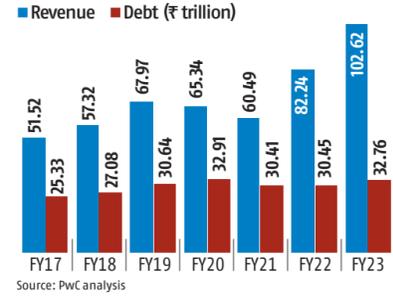
The reason for the difference in the two governments' legislative intent is the reduced strength of the BJP in Parliament after the general elections of 2024. That has subjected Modi 3.0 to political pressures of a coalition government. Thus, while Modi 2.0 went flat out with legislative changes, implementing its political agenda, Modi 3.0 is more focused on schemes and projects and less on its political goals.

Remember that this was not the BJP's intent before the elections. So confident it was of returning to power with a clear majority on its own that even before the polls had begun, BJP leaders had instructed all the key central ministries to prepare a 100-day action plan for policies to be rolled out soon after the formation of the new government. But the enthusiasm over that action plan waned as the BJP did not muster a majority in the Lok Sabha on its own. It is now either shelving schemes like the lateral entry of private-sector professionals into government jobs or reviewing its stance on including caste surveys in the forthcoming Census, all because it has come under the pressures of coalition politics.

Going forward, it would be reasonable to assume that Modi 3.0 would be more focused on projects and schemes which do not require any legislative change or which have the support of its coalition partners. An indication of this trajectory is evident from the way Modi 3.0 celebrated its first 100 days in office.

## FROM DEBT TO GROWTH

Performance of 2,341 listed manufacturing entities in India



might decrease, due to higher government borrowing to keep pump-priming the economy.

More importantly, a sustained delay in infusing capital could stoke a feeling of disenchantment within the youth. This can decelerate the pace at which the demographic dividend is realised by our economy.

As the old proverb goes, the best time to plant a tree was 30 years ago. The best time to initiate private investment is now.

The writers are, respectively, chairperson of PwC in India, and partner and lead for PwC India's Research and Insights Hub  
<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2024/07/16/world-economic-outlook-update-july-2024#Overview>  
<https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/economicssurvey/doc/chapter.pdf>

# Israel's deadly export industry



## BOOK REVIEW

CHITTAJIT MITRA

As the world witnesses the brutal ethnic cleansing in Gaza under the formidable military technology deployed by the Israeli Defence Forces, why are certain countries either mum or supportive of one of the biggest mass killings of the 21st century? In *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*, award-winning journalist and writer Antony Loewenstein reveals how the occupied territories of Palestine are used as a testing ground for Israeli weapons and

then sold around the world, irrespective of the consequences.

In 2021, the news of Pegasus spyware being used to spy on Indian activists, journalists, politicians from opposition parties and other individuals underlined the influential ambit of Israeli tech and weapons. The author shows through numerous sources how and why this extremely profitable system exists. Digging deeper into the settler colonialism project that is Israel, it is easy to see how the country has refrained from taking a moral stance on several humanitarian issues, though, ironically, it was the traumatising genocide of the Holocaust that accelerated its creation. During the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, for example, the Israeli government was found sending ammunition to the ruling Hutu regime, which went on to kill 800,000 Tutsis in 100 days by deploying weapons such as Uzi

submachineguns and hand grenades. When a minister in the Israeli government was questioned on this, he shrugged off responsibility by stating, "We have no control over where our weapons go." The silence that had engulfed the world since then has continued till today even when a genocide is being live-streamed for everyone to witness.

Israel's gradual ascent to its status as a weapons export giant was established even before the inception of the state by Zionist groups selling arms in the 1930s. The author chronicles this indiscriminate trade in the first chapter, explaining how, in many cases, such practices emboldened dictatorships all over the world. From Guatemala to Argentina, every single regime found a comfortable ally in Israel. The fact that Israel displays videos of their weapons killing Palestinians as a marketing tactic to the buyers underlines the amoral

practices that it condones and explains why it prefers conflict to exist.

In 2008, Benjamin Netanyahu famously said at a public event, "We are benefiting from one thing, and that is the attack on the Twin Towers and Pentagon and the American struggle in Iraq." This is one of the many easily available pieces of information that confirms America's military-industrial complex collaborates with its client state Israel to destroy the lives of many, especially those that are black and brown.

In the 21st century, surveillance technology is one of the key threats that widely impacts people. Mr Loewenstein helps the reader understand how different nations use such technologies to racially differentiate people. Living in Palestine means to be living under constant surveillance of the settler colonial forces,

and this isolation is replicated against other dissidents in different countries or refugees trying to seek asylum — whether it's the drones that are deployed to keep an eye on the migrants seeking refuge in Europe or the use of spyware by oppressive regimes to target people (journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder being a prime example). Under the grand scheme of the military industrial complex, such lives are dispensable and the so-called harbingers of democracy and peace in the West say nothing much, letting the business of killing continue as usual.

Colonisation is often considered a thing of the past but people often miss the systems and organisations in place that further the same objectives. The author also highlights how far-right politics has vitiated the minds of the local Israelis,

though there are many dissenters as well, as the recent protests against Mr Netanyahu's attempt to limit the powers of the court confirm. It's soon going to be a years since Gaza has faced brutal and relentless ethnic cleansing, leading to the deaths of more than 40,000 people, over half of them women and children. Hospitals, schools, libraries, along with innumerable homes and religious sites — some even older than the state of Israel — have been destroyed.

*The Palestinian Laboratory* simplifies the Palestinian quest for freedom and focuses on why violence against them fails to garner meaningful empathy from powerful nations all around the world, even though the public might be outraged about it. As a Jew, Mr Loewenstein's revelation portrays the bleak and horrifying reality of the export of violence and dominance all over the globe to maintain a world order that is, ultimately, subservient to the colonisers.

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## OUR VIEW



## The strange stability of oil prices amid war risks

Crude oil prices have barely budged despite an escalation in West Asian hostilities. Thank a favourable balance of demand and supply. Yet, low volatility cannot be taken for granted

The war in West Asia has intensified. With its Gaza operations against Hamas not yet over, Israel has aimed its firepower at Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militia based in Lebanon to its north. A wave of pager and walkie-talkie explosions last week rattled the militia's ranks, took lives, injured many and heralded a cross-border exchange of lethal projectiles that has taken an even larger toll, with hundreds reported killed by Israeli action this week. It looks like an attempt by Tel Aviv to neutralize a threat before the US pushes for restraint. These hostilities raise the risk of a flare-up that may draw Tehran directly into battle, even as sea trade routes face Houthi attacks, the Russia-Ukraine war shows no sign of abating and China is seen to be upping the ante in global geopolitics. Despite all this, the global market for crude oil has retained its composure. Having stayed in a relatively soft zone of around \$75 per barrel for months, oil has barely budged since the weekend, with a small gain reported on Tuesday in response to China's policy stimulus that may firm up demand, coupled with West Asia's woes and a US hurricane alert that could disrupt supply. That another theatre of war opened by Israel has had such a mild impact reveals the power held by the balance of demand and supply.

Consider the scenario. China's economic slowdown has kept demand weak, and even though it is trying hard to effect a revival, the pace of its move away from fossil fuels could mean it's unlikely to be the voracious oil guzzler that exporters would like it to be. Sure, the rising use of hydrocarbons in other big markets—including America and India—has held up global oil consumption, with 2024 set

to record a larger appetite for it than last year, but that force is being outweighed by the other one at play: supply. Western sanctions on Russian oil have not acted as a squeeze; tankers full of it (with some in disguise) have found their way to users. But the market's big stabilizer has been the role of US shale output in loosening the grip of Opec+ on prices. At one time, this cartel of oil producers could cut production to charge more. But now, as shale broadly turns profitable at prices above an estimated \$70-75, firmer prices simply attract more of it to fill that gap. Supply from non-Opec+ countries like Canada, Brazil and Guyana has also risen. In 1974, the Middle East used to drill 37% of the world's oil. This has slipped to 29%, leaving the Saudi Arabia-led cartel with less control and the region's volatility less of a worry. Indeed, Opec+ has had a hard time lately adjusting its oil spigots to achieve its stated price target (\$100 per barrel was given up in June), with divisions among its members making it harder for them to act in tandem. As cutbacks run the risk of losing market share without revenue gains from stronger prices, the cartel faces a strategic dilemma that's reflected in its messy record of decisions this year.

All taken into account, the current balance of demand and supply favours soft oil prices, as has been the case for about a year now. Earlier, the Reserve Bank of India had projected crude oil at \$85 per barrel this year, but the actual prices and our import bills so far have been even more benign. Yet, low volatility cannot be taken for granted. While Tehran mulls over US conditions for a revival of Iran's 'nuclear deal' that Washington scrapped in 2018, it also appears to have an ear turned to Beijing. Flare-up risks could easily spike.

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## MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

## The 'India growth story' doesn't quite explain today's IPO frenzy

Investors either see few other investment options or are dazzled by stock gains since March 2020



VIVEK KAUL  
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Bajaj Housing Finance recently entered the primary market with an initial public offering (IPO), aiming to raise ₹6,560 crore, but it drew bids exceeding ₹3.2 trillion. Similarly, PN Gadgil Jewellers sought to raise ₹1,100 crore and received bids of over ₹48,000 crore. Saraswati Saree Depot, targeting ₹160 crore, garnered bids surpassing ₹17,000 crore. Boss Solutions, which wanted to raise just ₹8 crore, ended up with bids of close to ₹1,100 crore. These examples reflect the current IPO frenzy in India.

Data from Chittorgarh, a portal specializing in IPO data, suggests that 2024 has seen 59 IPOs raising a total of ₹63,862 crore, with the average IPO being subscribed many times over.

Further, as the Reserve Bank of India's latest *State of the Economy* report says: "September is set to be the busiest month for IPOs... in 14 years, with over 28 companies entering the market so far." It also points out that "India accounted for the highest number of IPOs globally (27 per cent by volume) in the first half of 2024."

So, what's really happening here? Why is a company looking to raise ₹6,560 crore ending up with bids of over ₹3.2 trillion. Or why is a company looking to raise ₹8 crore ending up with bids of close to ₹1,100 crore?

Do these companies have unique business models expected to throw up a

lot of money in the years to come? Take the case of Bajaj Housing Finance, which is primarily in the home loans business as a non-banking finance company. Such businesses borrow money at a certain rate, lend at a higher rate and earn the margin. To earn higher margins, they'll either have to borrow at a much lower rate or charge much more for loans, which does not seem possible in what is a very competitive market. Further, if such a company tries to drum up more business by growing its loan book quickly, then it may have to start compromising on the quality of its lending, which will eventually impact its profits. Similarly, PN Gadgil Jewellers is a company in a sector with a well-established business model.

The same applies to many IPOs hitting the market today: these are not venture capitalist-backed businesses designed to leverage network effects—where customers once acquired find it hard to leave—and generate substantial monopolistic profits in the future, a potential that drives up valuations. Instead, most operate in competitive sectors where the chances of extremely high profits are next to non-existent. This can be seen in the lower valuations of companies that are already listed on stock exchanges and compete with these newer businesses.

And that brings us back to this question: Why is there such huge demand for these IPOs?

If you were to talk to anyone in the business of selling shares—from merchant bankers to stock brokers—or those in the business of managing other people's money (OPM)—you will hear that the India growth story is still going strong. For over the last two decades, this has been a standard reason offered for buying stocks.

From the end of 2002 to the end of 2007, the NSE 500 Total Returns Index (TRI)—a comprehensive measure of the broader Indian stock market that also accounts for dividends—delivered an impressive annual return of over 50%.

During this period, those involved in selling shares and managing OPM enthusiastically promoted the 'India growth story.' The problem is, they continued this narrative for the following decade, from the end of 2007 to the end of 2017, even though the NSE 500 TRI only delivered modest returns of around 7% per year.

So, the India growth story has been offered as a reason to buy stocks irrespective of valuation levels. And this is important because it leads many retail investors to buy stocks around times when they are extremely expensive, like they were in 2007 and like they are now in 2024, thus limiting their returns in the medium to long-term.

So why is there such huge demand for IPOs? The large sums of money chasing IPOs tells us that these investors do not see other viable investment opportunities available to them. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the huge returns delivered by stocks since March 2020 have made other investment avenues look unattractive to investors besotted with equities. So, it's a bit like the chicken and egg story.

Indeed, if one can make huge returns by sitting at home and investing in stocks over a smartphone, why would one bother investing in a small business or other financial investment avenues for that matter? So, we have reached a stage in this financial cycle where these expensive IPOs are actually hurting the Indian economy.

How long this trend will continue is anyone's guess. However, it's worth recalling what happened after the Reliance Power IPO hit the market at an astonishingly high valuation in early 2008. Data from Chittorgarh shows that there were 108 IPOs in 2007. We are in 2024 now and the highest number reached since has been 66 in 2010 and 63 in 2021. In fact, the number of IPOs from 2012 to 2020 stood at just 168. Every excess is followed by a quieter period, though its span of time can't be precisely predicted.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

The Middle East conflict is not just a local or regional issue, but a global one, requiring global attention and effort. A lasting resolution will require difficult compromises, but it will also bring immense benefits.

KOFI ANNAN

## GUEST VIEW

## Energy transition: Don't throw good money after bad

BJORN LOMBORG



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Despite much hype, the much-vaunted green energy transition away from fossil fuels isn't happening. Achieving a meaningful shift with current policies turns out to be unaffordably costly. We need to drastically change policy direction.

Globally, we are already spending almost \$2 trillion annually on trying to force an energy transition. Over the past decade, solar and wind energy use has increased to their highest-ever levels. But it hasn't reduced the use of fossil fuels—over the same time, their consumption has risen.

Countless studies show that when societies add more renewable energy, most of it never replaces coal, gas or oil. It simply adds to energy consumption. Recent research shows that for every six units of new green energy, less than one unit displaces any fossil fuel. Analysis in the United States shows that renewable energy subsidies simply lead to more overall energy being used. In other words, policies meant to boost green energy are leading to more emissions.

None of this should come as a surprise to any student of history. During the transition from wood to coal during the 1800s, overall wood use actually increased even while coal took over a greater proportion of overall energy needs. The same thing happened when we shifted from coal to oil: by 1970, oil, coal, gas and wood all delivered more energy than ever.

Humans have an unquenchable thirst for affordable energy, which is required for every aspect of modern life. In the past half-century, the energy we get from oil and coal has again doubled, hydro power has tripled, and gas has quadrupled—and we have experienced an explosion in the use of nuclear, solar and wind energy. The whole world—and the average person—has never had more energy available.

The grand plan underpinning today's green energy transition mostly insists that pushing heavily subsidized renewables everywhere will magically make fossil fuels go away. But a recent study concluded that talk of a transition is "misleading." During every previous addition of a new energy source, the researchers found, it has been "entirely unprecedented for these additions to cause a sustained decline in the use of established energy sources."

What causes us to change our relative use of energy? One study investigated 14 shifts that have taken place over the past five centuries, such as when farmers went from ploughing fields with animal-drawn ploughs to fossil fuel-powered tractors. The main driver has always been the fact that the new energy option is either better or cheaper.

Solar and wind fail on both counts. They are not better, because unlike fossil fuels that can produce electricity whenever we need it, they can only produce energy constrained by the vagaries of daylight and weather.

This means they are not cheaper either. At best, they are only cheaper when the sun is shining or the wind is blowing at just the right speed. The rest of the time, they are mostly inadequate and over-costly.

When we factor in the cost of just four hours of storage, wind and solar energy solutions become uncompetitive compared to fossil fuels. Achieving a real and sustainable transition to solar or wind would require

orders of magnitude more storage, making these options incredibly unaffordable.

Moreover, solar and wind only address a small part of a vast challenge. They are almost entirely deployed in the electricity sector, which makes up just one-fifth of all global energy use. We still struggle to find green solutions for most transport, and we haven't even begun to address the vast energy needs of indoor heating, manufacturing and agriculture. We are all but ignoring the hardest and most crucial sectors like steel, cement, plastics and fertilizers.

Little wonder then that, for all the talk of the world undergoing an energy transition, even the Joe Biden administration of the US finds that while renewable energy sources will dramatically increase globally up to 2050, oil, gas and coal will all keep increasing too.

On this trajectory, we will never achieve an energy transition away from fossil fuels. This would require vastly more subsidies for solar and wind, as well as for batteries and

hydrogen, and for all of us to accept less efficient technologies for important needs like steel and fertilizers. But on top of that, a true transition would also require politicians to impose massive taxes on fossil fuels to make them less desirable. McKinsey estimates the direct price-tag for a real transition at more than \$5 trillion annually. This splurge would slow economic growth, making the real cost five times higher. Annual costs for people living in rich countries could be higher than \$13,000 per person per year. Voters won't agree to accept such pain.

The only realistic way to achieve a transition is to vastly improve green energy alternatives. This means more investment in green energy research and development. Innovation is needed in wind and solar, but also in storage, nuclear energy and many other possible solutions. Bringing alternative energy costs below the price of fossil fuels is the only way that green solutions can be implemented globally, and not just by the elite in a few climate-concerned countries that have abundant financial resources.

When politicians say that a green transition is underway and we must get on board, they are really just asking voters to support their throwing of more good money after bad. We need to be much smarter.

**Current policies are fanning our energy-guzzling ways without reducing the world's reliance on fossil fuels**



MY VIEW | CAFE ECONOMICS

MINT CURATOR

# Central bank wars with inflation have left us plenty to think about

How long it took to tame rising prices defied text-book assumptions while the tool used offers the heterodox food for thought



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The US Federal Reserve began a new cycle of interest rate cuts last week. The 12 members of the Federal Open Market Committee lowered the key lending rate by a hefty 50 basis points. The rate-setting group expects four more cuts in 2025 and a further two in 2026, which means that the US policy rate could be settling at three percentage points below the current level, assuming we see more normal rate cuts of 25 basis points each from now on.

At the end of 2026, the US Fed Funds Rate is likely to be a slim 25 basis points higher than its level before the pandemic disrupted the global economy in the early months of 2020. In that case, the easing cycle will be far slower than the tightening cycle, which reflects the underlying reality that inflation accelerations tend to take place faster than the subsequent disinflation.

Nick Timiraos reported in the *Wall Street Journal* after the rate decision that the US central bank has had six previous rate-cutting cycles in the past three decades. Three of them began with a modest reduction of 25 basis points. Three others began with 50 basis points sliced off the key policy rate with one stroke. The deeper cutting actions were timed with extraordinary challenges—the bursting of the tech bubble in January 2001, the implosion of the subprime credit market in August 2007 and the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020.

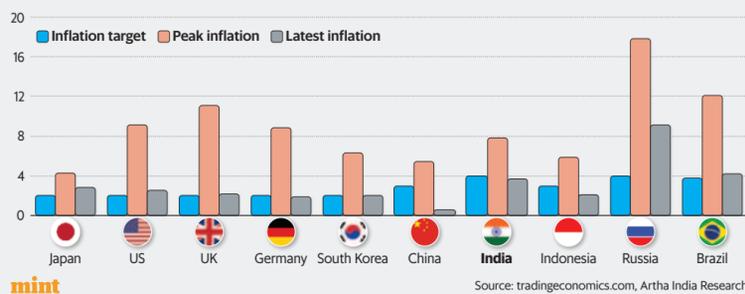
The size of the recent cut in one of the pivotal rates in US financial markets is thus unusual. It comes in the wake of expectations of a soft landing in that country, rather than the beginning of a severe recession, as was the case in 2001, 2007 and 2020. The official statement from the US Fed says that “the unemployment rate has moved up but remains low” while “inflation remains somewhat elevated” despite trending down.

One explanation for such a drastic rate reduction is that it is a response to the intensity of the post-pandemic tightening cycle that saw US interest rates rise sharply, to their highest level in 20 years, in response to inflation not seen there since the early 1980s. The US Fed funds rate was pushed up by 5.25 percentage points within 16 months, through 11 rate hikes, from 2022 to 2023. It is worth remembering that the “higher for longer” narrative was quite widespread as recently as May. So the question worth asking right now is this: Has the wave of inflation across the world decisively receded?

In 2021, all the ten major economies represented in the alongside table had peak inflation that was above their formal targets. The reasons are well known, especially the combination of a demand stimulus in the midst of a supply squeeze. Price levels had threatened to get out of control, more so in the US, UK and Europe.

## Inflation divergences

All countries barring a few now have inflation rates below the targets set for their respective central banks.



The situation is quite different now. Only a few countries such as Japan and Russia have inflation levels that are far higher than the targets their central banks have been given. A few countries have inflation well below target. China is one important example. It is worth asking whether it will once again be exporting deflationary impulses to the rest of the world, as it did in the first decade of this century, a result of its chronic overcapacity in several key sectors—or what is now described as the second China shock.

Inflation has generally normalized, but not every central bank seems confident that the battle is over. That shows in the different central bank actions over the past few months. The US Fed, the European Central Bank and very recently the Indonesian one have reduced the cost of money in their respective economies.

Russia, Japan and Brazil have moved the other way. Their most recent monetary policy action has been to increase interest rates. All three have inflation well above target.

The third group is countries whose monetary authorities have still kept their fingers on the

pause button—the UK, Korea, China and India. Such a divergence is not unusual. It is generally the case that it is easier to coordinate monetary policy globally during a crisis than in relatively normal times. Interests are better aligned in a crisis. Also, entry can be an easier decision than exit when it comes to monetary policy. A former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor had once compared this dilemma to the *chakravyuha* that trapped a young Abhimanyu in the Mahabharata.

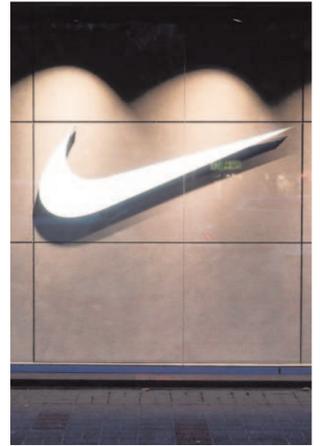
There are two important takeaways from the recent inflation-disinflation cycle. First, inflationary pressures took a lot more time to recede in many advanced economies where it is assumed that inflation expectations are well anchored. This is not what standard textbooks tell us to expect. Second, despite several calls for price controls, it is clearly monetary policy action that did most of the work in bringing down general inflation. That is where the textbook medicine did its job. These two inconvenient facts are a challenge for economists in opposing camps—the first for those following the mainstream and the second for those who identify themselves as heterodox.

# Nike Inc has gone and done it: The company has a new CEO

The new chief needs to revive this sneaker-maker's winning ways



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Nike's slogan 'Winning isn't for everyone' has begun to look out of place. REUTERS

Nike Inc, the sneaker-maker, has gone and done it. Last week, it parted company with Chief Executive Officer John Donahoe and replaced him with Elliott Hill, a longtime Nike executive who had retired in 2020.

Hill is a company veteran who should be able to reconnect with staff and retail partners. But with the depth of the decline over the past two years, a raft of sports-wear upstarts nipping at Nike's heels and Adidas CEO Bjorn Gulden proving himself to be an accomplished and nimble merchant, it won't be quick or easy to get the \$50 billion giant back on track.

It is surprising it took Nike so long to acknowledge the need for change. Donahoe's position was looking increasingly untenable. With the company's performance sliding and the shares down 25% this year, unusually, change at the top was being openly discussed. Last month, Bill Ackman's Pershing Square Holdings Ltd disclosed a \$229 million stake.

The root of the current problems can be traced back to Donahoe's strategy, after his appointment in 2020, of trying to turn Nike into a combination of a tech powerhouse and luxury brand.

Initially, it worked. In June 2021, the shares soared to a record high as Nike projected that its sales would surpass \$50 billion for the first time.

But prioritizing Nike's own websites and stores and cutting back the supply of products to retailers, such as Foot Locker Inc, left gaps on shelves that were filled by rivals. That includes Adidas and New Balance, but also a host of challenger brands such as On Holding and Deckers Outdoor's Hoka.

Meanwhile, Nike's sneaker hit factory stalled. After popular styles caught on with fashionistas, such as the Airforce 1, Nike Dunk and Air Jordan 1, there was little new footwear to take their place—or inspire shoppers.

At the same time, fashion tastes pivoted away from chunky basketball sneakers to lower-rise retro styles, led by Adidas' Samba. Nike has a portfolio of such items in its archives, such as the Cortez, but while Adidas' Gulden quickly realized that Sambas were trending and ramped up their production, Nike was slower to shift to this aesthetic.

Hill will be familiar with the Nike history and culture and well regarded among many of its staff. Consequently, he should be able to galvanize employees and lift morale after a string of departures. On top of his to-do list will be coming up with

some sneakers that shoppers want to buy again. Nike must reach out to athletes in the running category, for example, where it has lost ground to On and Hoka.

But as the popularity of the Airforce 1 and Dunk show, Nike is also a fashion brand. It must sharpen its style credentials and win sales back from Adidas. It should take a leaf out of Inditex's Zara book and develop products more quickly. It also needs to have a pipeline of fresh footwear so that it can avoid making the same mistake again by relying too much on one franchise.

Hill must also intensify the work that Donahoe began this year, rebuilding relationships with retailers to get more Nike sneakers into stores. After all, Nike doesn't just sell to sneaker-heads but a broad demographic slice. In July, it rehired Tom Peddie, a veteran executive who had worked for Nike for 30 years before retiring in 2020 to spearhead these efforts.

Finally, Hill must simply get Nike's groove back, returning to the marketing it was once known for, and reviving the allure that made some of the world's leading brands want to partner with it. Its notable that LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton SE's Loewe, one of the hottest around, has collaborated with On. Just a few years ago this would most likely have been Nike.

All of this will take time. “Things haven't been easy,” Hill wrote in a memo to staff, seen by *Bloomberg News*.

That's understating it. It can take more than a year to bring new products to the market.

Adidas is showing no sign of weakening. Indeed, cycles where either Nike or Adidas is dominant can last several years. Even though Nike remains the leader, the sportswear market has become much more fragmented and crowded.

Against this backdrop Hill should look to re-base expectations, to get all the bad news out of the way and move forward. Initial relief that sent the shares up as much as 9% after market could prove short-lived.

This summer, Nike unveiled its new advertising slogan, “Winning Isn't for Everyone.” After the turmoil of the past few years, it's clear that the company just cannot afford to lose again. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

# AI must demonstrate what it can achieve on the ground

RAHUL MATTHAN



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It has been over two years since Generative AI first burst on the scene—and I have to say that I have grown increasingly frustrated with it.

I jumped onto the artificial intelligence (AI) bandwagon long before ChatGPT was launched. Two years on, after having tried virtually every new application and implementation, I am yet to find one I can rely on. I thought AI was going to do my research for me, write my articles and generally help me make sense of the world. Instead I find myself double-checking everything it sends—more often than not discarding its suggestions and starting from scratch. We need AI to solve real-world problems that humans cannot. If it cannot, it will be just a passing fad.

Just as I was about to give up on it entirely, I came across an application of AI in the education space that just might restore my faith in its promise. But before I tell you all about it, I need to first explain the complex process of learning how to read.

Children naturally develop the ability to speak—organically learning how to associate the sounds they hear spoken by the adults around them with the objects and actions that those words are meant to represent. They, however, need to be taught how to read. In other words, they need active instruction on how to associate the sounds they already know with the squiggly symbols (alphabets) that we use to construct written words and sentences.

Studies have shown that the ability of students to make sense of what they are being taught is directly correlated with the speed and accuracy with which they can read. We call such students fluent readers. Our entire education system is predicated on children *learning to read* by the 4th grade so that, having achieved fluency, they can *read to learn*. In higher classes, they are expected to not only follow what is spoken in class, but also what is written on the blackboard and in text books. To do this, their brains need to be wired so that they can quickly and correctly decode symbols into sounds to better understand advanced concepts. Those for whom this wiring is incomplete or deficient will lag their classmates in comprehension.

One of the main reasons why students are identified as poor learners in our education

system is that they are unable to read as quickly as those around them. They struggle to understand what is being taught in class—not because they are academically challenged, but because their brains struggle to comprehend what exactly they are reading. If that is the case, then all it should take to improve their educational outcomes is a new way to help them re-wire their brain so that they can make these missing connections and improve the speed at which they read.

This is easier said than done. Every child takes a different educational path. As a result, the way one child's brain has been wired will differ from those of students sitting next to her in class.

There is, therefore, no one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. Even the most dedicated teacher will simply be incapable of providing this level of customized education to every student in her class to make sure that those who are lagging behind can catch up with those who are on track.

This is where AI can play a role. Today, AI is more than capable of understanding spoken conversation. It can, therefore, not only assess the written comprehension levels of different students, but also devise customized remedial pathways that address the unique deficiencies of each and every child.

This is what the government of Tamil Nadu set out to do with its MozhiGal programme, a teacher-supported reading initiative that has leveraged AI to improve the language learning of children in that district. Since March 2023, when it was launched, it has been offered to over 900,000 children in over 6,000 schools in an attempt to improve their reading skills.

So how does it work? Children who join the programme are initially placed in front of a computer and given a piece of text to read aloud. The AI records this, and, by comparing what they've said to the written text they were given, is able to identify the syllables and phonemes that they are having trouble comprehending.

With this information in hand, the AI develops customized practice material—words and sentences specifically designed to meet the unique needs of each individual child. The child then practises by reading the sentence out loud, taking help from the computer for words that she finds a struggle. As she practises, the algorithm dynamically adapts the sessions to adjust them with her progress, constantly working towards increasing her familiarity with words that she is unable to recognize.

As a result, children improve their ability to read in gradual steps, increasing their familiarity and speed with each round. This boosts their confidence and motivates them to try harder and more complex sentences.

In a few short months, children enrolled in the MozhiGal programme have shown remarkable improvements in reading speed. The students who have been through its learning modules are already engaging more actively in class and seem more confident about their course-work. While it is still early days, there is every likelihood that their academic results will also improve.

The real promise of artificial intelligence lies in the practical uses to which this technology can be put. We need many more applications like this.

It'll live up to its promise if it can plug education deficiencies, for example, as AI seems capable of

# Why ISRO's planned mission to Venus is important

ANONNA DUTT  
 NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 24

THE UNION Cabinet last week approved India's first mission to planet Venus, with ISRO aiming for a launch in March 2028. This will be India's second inter-planetary mission after the Mars Orbiter Mission that was launched in 2013.

The mission spacecraft, which will orbit Venus, will carry scientific instruments to study the surface, atmosphere, and ionosphere of the planet, and its interaction with the Sun.

## Why is it important to study Venus?

Venus is often referred to as Earth's "twin" because of the two planets' similarities in mass, density, and size. Importantly, it is thought to have had liquid water in the past. For a long time, scientists believed that Venus could have supported life — like Earth.

However, the planet differs from our own in some very significant ways.

**First**, it has an extremely high surface temperature of around 462 degree Celsius. This is higher than even Mercury, the planet closest to the Sun. Scientists believe that this is because of a runaway greenhouse gas effect. The water present on the Venusian surface is thought to have evaporated due to the planet's proximity to the Sun, with the water vapour acting as a greenhouse gas trapping more heat and further evaporating water from the planet's surface.

**Second**, the atmospheric pressure on Venus is much higher than Earth. It is almost similar to the pressure felt underneath the oceans on Earth. This is because the Venusian atmosphere is about 93 times thicker than Earth.

The combined heat and intense pressure have meant that no Venus lander has survived on the planet for more than a couple of hours.

**Third**, more than 96.5% of the dense atmosphere of Venus is made up of carbon dioxide. Nitrogen makes up around 3%, with trace amounts of other gases like sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, water vapour, argon, and helium making up the rest. The atmosphere also contains clouds of sulphuric acid, with acid rain not uncommon.

**Fourth**, Venus rotates very slowly on its axis as compared to Earth. One rotation of Venus lasts around 243 Earth days.

Scientists study the similarities and differences between Earth and Venus to better understand the evolution of our home planet — and why it became hospitable to life, compared to its "twin".

## What will ISRO's Venus mission look like?

Earth and Venus come close to each other once every 19 months, offering a short window for launching a spacecraft to the planet.

While the mission was originally slated for 2023, according to the latest timeline, the launch will take place some time in March 2028, with the spacecraft set to take around 140 days (after exiting Earth's orbit) to reach the planet.

The spacecraft will follow a similar trajectory as other ISRO space exploration missions — first it will gain speed in Earth's orbit, then it will be slung-shot towards Venus, and ultimately be captured in Venus' own orbit.

The mission will carry scientific payloads weighing around 100 kg. Proposals for at least 17 Indian and seven international experiments were selected for the mission by 2019. The Indian payloads include an L and S band Synthetic Aperture Radar that can help in imaging the surface of the planet, a thermal camera, an experiment to study the flow of interplanetary dust particles, an experi-

ment to study the high-energy particles entering the Venusian atmosphere leading to its ionisation, and another one to study the composition, structure, variability and the thermal state of the Venus atmosphere.

## How will the Venus mission be different from previous ISRO undertakings?

The Venus mission will be the first from India to perform aero-breaking.

Initially, the spacecraft will be placed in a highly elliptical orbit of 500 km x 60,000 km around Venus. This is due to fuel considerations. However, such an orbit is too high for conducting scientific experiments. This is where aero-breaking will come in.

The spacecraft will be brought down to either 300 km x 300 km or 200 km x 600 km orbit with the help of this technology. The spacecraft will be pushed down to around 140 km above the Venusian surface several times, at which point it will skim through the outer layer of the planet's atmosphere. This

will create drag and slow down the atmosphere, thus gradually reducing its orbit.

It will take roughly six months of manoeuvring for the spacecraft to reach the intended orbit, as per discussions of scientists during ISRO's Venus science meet in 2022. Once there, the satellite will completely exit the planet's atmosphere to ensure it does not slow down further, or burn fuel to prevent the orbit from further reducing.

## What are some other missions planned to study Venus?

There have been several missions to Venus in the past by the United States, the erstwhile USSR, Japan, and a collaborative mission by Japan and the European Space Agency.

The US has planned at least two more missions to Venus in the future — DaVinci in 2029 and Veritas in 2031. The European Space Agency has planned the EnVision mission for 2030.

## EXPLAINED SCIENCE

# WHEN DID HUMANS FIRST RIDE HORSES? THE COMPLEX ANSWER IN NEW STUDY

CAN HORSEBACK riding alter the shape of the human skeleton? The answer, according to a new study, is complicated. A team of researchers has found that although horseback riding leaves subtle marks on human skeletons, those changes cannot confirm whether people have ridden horses during their lives. Other activities, such as prolonged sitting or cart riding, can also result in similar alterations.

The findings cast doubt on a long-held theory in the field of archaeology. Known as the Kurgan hypothesis, it argues that humans began domesticating horses as early as the fourth millennium BC.

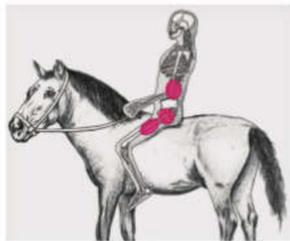
The new study, "Tracing horseback riding and transport in the human skeleton", was published in the journal *Science Advances* on September 20. It was carried out by Lauren Hosek, Robin J James, and William T T Taylor, all from the University of Colorado Boulder in the United States.

## What is the Kurgan hypothesis?

The question of when humans first started to use horses for transport has been a subject of debate for long. The Kurgan hypothesis emerged in the early 20th Century and proposed that domestication of horses began around 3500 BC by ancient humans, known as the Yamnaya, who lived near the Black Sea. They used the horses to travel across Eurasia, and by doing so, spread primordial versions of the languages that would later evolve into English, French, etc.

William T T Taylor, one of the authors of the new study, told *Phys.org*, "A lot of our understanding of both the ancient and modern worlds hinges on when people started using horses for transportation... For decades, there's been this idea that the distribution of Indo-European languages is, in some way, related to the domestication of the horse."

In 2023, a team of scientists published a study analysing a handful of human skeletons belonging to the Yamnaya people, dating back to around 3000 BC. The researchers claimed to have found evidence of wear and tear in the skeletons from horse riding, which supported the



Horseback riding leaves subtle marks on human skeletons. *Science Advances*

## Kurgan hypothesis.

The new study, however, has introduced a layer of scepticism regarding the findings of that analysis.

## What has the new study found?

Lauren Hosek, who is the lead author of the study, and her team examined numerous medical studies of modern equestrians and records of human remains across thousands of years.

They found that the changes in the shape of the hip joint, which some researchers have cited as evidence for early horseback riding, can result from various activities. For example, ancient humans — who are believed to have used donkeys, wild asses, and cattle to pull carts before domesticating horses — could have experienced similar changes due to riding carts or chariots.

"Over time, this repetitive, intense pressure from that kind of jostling in a flexed position could cause skeletal changes," Hosek told *Phys.org*.

This means that human skeletons alone cannot be enough evidence to confirm that the Yamnaya people domesticated horses.

"We need to couple... [human skeleton] data with evidence coming out of genetics and archaeology and by looking at horse remains, too," Hosek said.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

## EXPLAINED SCIENCE

## EXPLAINED LAW

# Probe against Siddaramaiah

Questions of private complaint and public servant: Why Karnataka High Court upheld the Governor's approval to investigate the CM, saying there is a 'real likelihood of bias' from the state government

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM  
 NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 24

IN A setback to Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the Karnataka High Court on Tuesday allowed an investigation against him in the alleged Mysore Urban Development Authority (MUDA) scam case.

Justice M Nagaprasanna upheld Governor Thawarchand Gehlot's decision to grant sanction to a probe against the Chief Minister. The decision to allow investigation is an "irresistible conclusion," the 200-page ruling stated.

## What is the case against Siddaramaiah?

On August 16, Governor Gehlot allowed the police to investigate the Chief Minister's involvement in the alleged MUDA scam. The development came in response to complaints filed by three anti-corruption activists — T J Abraham, Snehamayi Krishna, and Pradeep Kumar.

According to the complaints, the Chief Minister's wife, Parvathi, got 14 housing plots in Mysuru in 2021 (when the BJP was in power) in exchange for 3.16 acres of land that was allegedly acquired illegally by MUDA around 2013. This allegedly resulted in a Rs 55.80 crore loss for the state.

On August 1, Karnataka's Council of Ministers met and passed a resolution "strongly advising" the Governor to withdraw the complaints. However, the Governor allowed proceedings against the Chief Minister under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023.

## Why did the Governor grant sanction?

This sanction is necessary under Section 17A of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA) to investigate and prosecute public officials for offences allegedly committed during the "discharge of official functions or duties". The police officer must receive the "previous approval" of the "authority competent to remove" the public official from office, which in the case of the Chief Minister is the Governor of the state.

The Governor's order stated that this was an "extraordinary circumstance" because it is difficult to conclude that the Council of Ministers acted "fairly and in a bona fide manner". The order also said that it is "natural" that the Council of Ministers would support the Chief Minister who is responsible for their appointments. The Council of Ministers also ignored certain key pieces of information regarding the transaction in their resolution, according to the order.



Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah (right) is administered the oath of office by Governor Thawarchand Gehlot in Bengaluru in 2023. *Jithendra M*

## On what grounds did Siddaramaiah challenge the sanction?

Siddaramaiah moved the Karnataka High Court, challenging the Governor's decision on three grounds.

First, whether sanction can be given when the complaint is made by a private person. Section 17A of the PCA specifically deals with the procedure when the police seek sanction to conduct an inquiry.

Second, the sanction is invalid since Siddaramaiah was not discharging any official functions at the time of the land acquisition that is in question. He was an MLA but was in the Opposition.

Third, the Governor ignored the advice of the Council of Ministers and allowed a probe against the Chief Minister. Under Article 163 of the Constitution of India, the Governor is bound by the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers.

## What did the court decide?

**On whether a private complaint can be entertained:** The High Court said that if a private person could not seek recourse under the PCA when they had a complaint against a public official, they would be forced to file a complaint under the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973. As a result, the police would have no choice but to register the crime and begin the investigation. This, the High Court said, would make the protection of requiring prior sanction under the PCA "redundant" as it means to protect public officials from being the target of frivolous cases.

So, not only can a private individual file a complaint under the PCA, it is also "necessary" for private individuals to seek the necessary approval under Section 17A, the

court said.

**On whether Siddaramaiah was a 'public servant':** The Chief Minister argued that none of the allegations in any of the complaints points to a single decision or recommendation made by Siddaramaiah. This, they argued, was a necessary requirement to grant sanction under Section 17A of the PCA as the offence must be "relatable to any recommendation made or decision taken by such public servant in discharge of his official functions or duties".

On this issue, the court noted that the alleged scam pertains to the series of transactions and apparent irregularities surrounding the 3.16 acres of land in Mysuru. The reasons are:

■ Siddaramaiah was a member of the ruling party when his brother-in-law acquired the land in 2004 and got permission to convert it from agricultural to residential land;

■ The rule for compensation was amended in 2015 following Parvathi's application, increasing the amount of land given to the land loser;

■ Their son Yathindra S was an ex-officio member of the MUDA when compensation of 14 sites in Mysore city for Parvathi was finalised in 2017;

■ Parvathi should have been allotted 4,800 sq ft of land as compensation, according to the rules. However, she was allotted 38,284 sq ft of land worth Rs 55.8 crores.

The court also found that significant action from the state appeared to coincide with Siddaramaiah's stints as MLA, Deputy Chief Minister, and Chief Minister. Justice Nagaprasanna said, "If this does not require investigation, I fail to understand what other case can merit investigation, as the benefi-

ary is the family of the petitioner and the benefit is by leaps and bounds, it is in fact a windfall."

"If this were to be a case of common man, he would not have fought shy of facing the investigation. In the opinion of the Court, the Chief Minister, a leader of the proletariat, the bourgeois and of any citizen, should not fight shy of any investigation," he also said.

**On the issue of the powers of the Governor:** The court held that the Governor can act independently to give permission to prosecute a Chief Minister or a Minister if there is a "real likelihood of bias" from the state government. Justice Nagaprasanna said, "What would unmistakably emerge is that the decision of the Cabinet — the cabinet nominated by the Chief Minister, would not be free from bias or being partisan towards their leader. It is in such exceptional circumstance, independent discretion is imperative."

The High Court cited the Supreme Court's ruling in *Madhya Pradesh Police Establishment v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2004), where the court held that the Governor could provide sanction if the material on record shows a *prima facie* (at face value) case against the public official. Governor Gehlot also relied on this case in his order which granted sanction.

The High Court also stated that although the Governor is typically bound by aid and advice of the Council of Ministers, in this case, the "exceptional circumstances" of a possibility of bias justify the Governor's decision to grant sanction.

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# With 'Laapataa Ladies' India's official Oscars entry, how selection works

ARUSHI BHASKAR  
 NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 24

THE KIRAN Rao directorial *Laapataa Ladies* ("Missing Women") on Monday became India's official entry for the Best International Feature Film category at the 97th Academy Awards, to be held next year.

Backed by veteran actor Aamir Khan's production house, the Hindi film became critically and commercially successful following its release in March 2024. It focuses on two newlywed women who accidentally swap places during a train ride to their respective husbands' homes.

Rao took to Instagram to express her "heartfelt gratitude to the selection committee and to everyone who believed in the film". She said, "It is indeed a great privilege to be selected from among such amazing Indian films this year — who are equally

worthy contenders for this honour."

The Film Federation of India (FFI) announced the film's selection in Chennai. A total of 29 movies were under consideration, including Payal Kapadia's Cannes winner *All We Imagine As Light*, Anand Ekarshi's National Award-winning *Aattam*, and Sandeep Reddy Vanga's controversial blockbuster *Animal*.

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## EXPLAINED CULTURE

## What is the FFI?

On its website, the FFI describes itself as the "parent body of all the leading film associations of India". Its ob-

jectives include promoting "commerce in general and in particular to promote, protect and watch over the interests of the Indian Film Industry and allied industries and trades, including the interests of producers, distributors and exhibitors of films and of all other persons connected with the film industry."

It also aims to "popularise the film in-



*Laapataa Ladies* was released in March.

dustry and its products in India and abroad", and appoints the 13-member jury that decides which film to send to the Academy

Awards. These members are "senior qualified people" from the "creative field", according to a press release. This jury also has a chairperson — currently, Assamese director Jahnua Barua — whom the FFI nominates.

The current jury only comprised men, leading many on social media to comment on the "laapataa (missing)" ladies in the selection committee, and criticising the arbitrariness of the process.

## How does FFI select the entry?

The executive committee, headed by the FFI president (currently Ravi Kottarakara), typically "invites" filmmakers to submit their cinematic works for jury evaluation.

The submissions must fit the Academy's eligibility rules, such as the film being at least 40 minutes long and produced outside the United States. More than 50% of its dialogues should be in a non-English language. It should have had at least a seven-day theatrical release between November 1, 2023, and September 30, 2024.

A payment of Rs 1.25 lakh must also be made to complete the submission. After all the films have been screened for the jury, the final choice is decided by a vote. Barua told *The Indian Express* in a recent interview, "We were in Chennai for 7-8 days, and we were watching the 29 films that were sent to us. Throughout this period, we used to have in-depth discussions about the films." On the jury's selection criteria, he said the film should represent India's social systems and ethos.

In its citation, the FFI said *Laapataa Ladies* is a "film that can engage, entertain and make sense not just to women in India but also universally as well".

However, it also attracted criticism for its language and some typos.

The citation begins with "Indian women are a strange mixture of submission and dominance", and goes on to say that the film "shows you that women can happily desire to be home makers as well as rebel and be entrepreneurially inclined."

## What is the Best International Feature Film category?

The Academy Awards invite countries from across the world to send their best films to compete for the prize.

"Selection of that film shall be made by one approved organisation, jury or committee, of which at least 50% must include artists and/or craftspeople from the field of motion pictures," the Academy's rules state.

The final nominations are determined through voting. A preliminary committee views the eligible submissions and votes by secret ballot to produce a shortlist of 15 films. The nominating committee views those films and votes by secret ballot to determine five final nominees. The Academy members then vote for the winner.

Three Indian films have made it to the final nominations — *Mother India* (1957), *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) and *Lagaan* (2001), all in Hindi. Last year, the Malayalam film *2018: Everyone is a Hero* on the Kerala floods was India's official entry.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# And the woman vanishes

The citation that commends 'Laapataa Ladies' for the Oscars undermines its own case



KISHWAR DESAI

## IN COLD BLOOD

When accused are killed and police get away with murder, it's a stain on the justice system. The courts should step in

ASTRAVESTY IS unfolding, across states, and in an otherwise noisy democracy, it is playing to a disquieting silence. Reports in this paper on Tuesday shone a light on three police "encounters" of alleged criminals in three states on Monday. In Badlapur, a 23-year-old janitor arrested last month for allegedly sexually assaulting two four-year-old girls, was killed by the police in "retaliatory firing"; in Unnao, the UP Special Task Force gunned down an accused in a jewellery robbery case, days after his co-accused was killed in a police encounter; in Chennai, one of the most wanted men in the region became the third history-sheeter to be killed in similar circumstances since July. Common to these killings in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu is not just the fact that all three men who were killed had serious criminal charges against them, but also this: All three deaths reek of a police vigilantism that is allowed to get away with murder — literally. Going by past record, it is safe to say that these killings will not be thoroughly scrutinised for the short-circuiting of due process in a constitutional democracy, nor taken up as an urgent issue by the Opposition parties or the Court, nor made into a cause for mobilisation by society. The culture of quietude and impunity in which they take place criminalises the police while making everyone else a witness, if not complicit.

The police approach of shoot first and ask no questions later, far from being censured, is celebrated and encouraged politically. In UP, for instance, most notably on the watch of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a dismal pattern has been firmed up by this brutalised policy of crime and punishment. The accused, who, according to similar-sounding FIRs, arrive invariably on a "motorcycle" and are killed in the early morning hours or at night by policemen who claim to have carried out "nyuntam (minimal) firing", are treated as guilty, and law enforcers are cast as agents of vigilante justice. The political establishment is self-congratulatory. Last month, after the rape and murder of the RG Kar Medical College doctor, Mamata Banerjee's ever-ascendant nephew, who likes to seize the moral high ground against his political rivals, called for short-circuiting due process by hanging or killing "rapists" in an encounter. Police encounter numbers are totted up and projected as evidence of the government's "zero tolerance" on crime. And, as in the killing of Atiq Ahmad, don-turned-politician and his brother, at point blank range by assailants, right under the nose of policemen who were escorting them to hospital in 2023, it also enables a dystopian scenario of citizens conducting their own encounter killings.

The Supreme Court has recently spoken out against "bulldozer justice" — the outrageous practice of state governments demolishing homes and properties of people accused in crimes, in the name of acting against "illegal encroachment" — and invited suggestions for pan-India guidelines. It must now turn its attention to the other routinised violation of due process, across states, of encounter killings. In a constitutional democracy, when the executive crosses lines, other institutions need to act as a check. In this case, "the people" seem unmoved because few will shed a tear for a rape-accused or a murder-accused. However, their execution in cold blood is a stain, deep and dark, on the justice system. Every encounter killing is the state thumbing its nose at the law and at due process. Only the courts can — and they should — step in to draw the line.

THE SCREEN LADIES may be *laapataa*, but then so are the rest of us ladies. Lost. Adrift. Especially after reading why *Laapataa Ladies* (LL) was chosen.

While every year the official entry to the Oscars is usually that one film that is unlikely to win, this time it is the citation for LL which may ensure that this chosen film will lose. "Indian women are a strange mixture of submission and dominance," says the citation authoritatively as though the jury had stumbled upon some unique and alien species called "Indian women," after viewing LL. Obviously, till this film was made, the jury had no idea that Indian women could be both submissive and aggressive. They had probably always believed that Indian women could be either one or the other. Not even passive-aggressive or aggressive-passive. Just One. Or the other. Never, ever, a mix. Unheard of. Strange. For sure.

And, apparently, it is this unique quality about Indian women revealed in this film that makes it Oscar-worthy. "Well-defined, powerful characters in one world, *Laapataa Ladies* (Hindi) captures this diversity perfectly, though in a semi-idyllic world and in a tongue-in-cheek way."

The diversity here is not that the women are from different communities, castes or cultures — or even LGBTQIA+ — but that they are both aggressive and passive — and so, they are diverse. And how is the world of LL even remotely "semi-idyllic"? Unless you think that women who live in a world where they are abused is semi-idyllic because it is idyllic when they are not being abused. And "tongue in cheek"? That completely wrecks any notion of authenticity.

The next line is even more banal: "It shows you that women can happily desire to be home makers as well as rebel and be entrepreneurially inclined." So the jury accepts that women have choices, because — surprise! — this film reveals that too! Seventy-seven years after Independence, the world gets a wake-up call, and realises that Indian women can multitask, or have mul-

multiple identities, all through LL.

But why does one have to "rebel" in order to be "entrepreneurially inclined"? And do it all "happily"? Really? Do women need to do all this happily or have I lost the plot?

"A story that can simultaneously be seen as one that needs change, and one that can bring about change. *Laapataa Ladies* (Hindi) is a film that can engage, entertain and make sense not just to women in India but universally as well..."

All these mindless little sentences in the citation makes one realise that the jury was struggling to find one really outstanding thing to say about the film. Why does it have to make sense to women in India and not the men?

So the real question is: If the jury saw it as such a mundane film, with nothing new or revolutionary to say in either the way it is scripted or shot, why bother to send it?

To be officially nominated for the Oscar is something every filmmaker dreams about. And to do so with her second directorial attempt is to Kiran Rao's enormous credit. I do want to add that given the struggle that women face, and the glass ceilings they have to break, to direct a film itself is a huge step forward. Thus, is the citation a recognition for Rao's film or is it just damning with faint praise because we have to send a "nice" film to the Oscars? A "happy" little film made by an Indian woman starring other Indian women who outwit the misogynistic bad guys at the end?

Because definitely, all these well meaning messages are in Rao's film: Young girls in rural India need to look beyond marriage and take up organic farming, instead. They need to be financially independent. They need not despair when abandoned at railway stations as other marginalised individuals will be there to help them. They should resist wearing *ghonghats*, etc. The problem is, that in the hands of a master filmmaker like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, all the messages would have rolled out, subtly, wittily and even yes, humorously. Not so with Rao, whose heart is obvi-

ously in the right place and her intentions are noble — but each message hammers you on the head, till you acknowledge its presence.

It is also not clear how much this film represents India or the changes that have taken place in filmmaking. It is a sweet, but dull film — with tropes that are so familiar that many like me have practically grown up watching them on Doordarshan and on other "do good" (not necessarily "feel good") platforms. But where is the edginess, the anger, the angst, the restlessness, the cleverness, the excitement, that you can always sense in a film that deserves to win every award? That is totally *laapataa*.

We are all content with Rao's film, and pleased with its success. But as a "*laapataa lady*" myself (at a metaphorical level), I do not understand the bland citation. Having been on juries, I know that sometimes it is not the best candidate but the "compromise" one that wins. For example, *Aattam* is a film that deserves to be sent to the Oscars. Fabulously shot and with an amazing cast, it was not chosen; neither was another celebrated woman-led film, Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light*.

But, could it be that for the official entry, we often confuse our Indian identity with what we want the world to see about us at the Oscars? Shouldn't we just be hungry for the award? The world has changed and we should showcase the best of Indian cinema abroad — no matter how difficult the subject, and how much it challenges our own perceptions of our country. Playing it safe with a woman-led film about gender justice will not ensure glory, as the award will go to the best product, not the best intention.

If the jury really wants the film to do well, can Rao at least ask them for a rewrite of the patriarchal citation? Or, forgive me, was it just happily "tongue-in-cheek"?

Desai is an author, playwright and the chair of two museums. Her biography on Devika Rani, *The Longest Kiss*, won the National Award for best writing on Indian cinema

## CLEAN-UP SANS TEETH

Vacancies in pollution control boards point to an environmental regulation dogged by lack of expertise and autonomy

IN THE PAST five years, several studies have documented the health and economic effects of pollution in India. These have underlined that bad air, poor quality water and tardy waste management are problems not just of big cities, they undermine the quality of life of people in Tier 2 and 3 cities as well. The problem does not stem from a lack of laws. Effective monitoring and implementation have been the Achilles heel in the battle against pollution. The problem, as an affidavit submitted by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to the National Green Tribunal acknowledged, is that regulatory bodies have been chronically understaffed. Nearly half of all posts in state pollution control boards (SPCB) are vacant, some for decades. Nearly 54 per cent of the sanctioned posts in the National Capital Region, whose problems with bad air begin with the onset of the festive season in October and continue well into winter, are vacant.

SPCBs were set up in 1974 under the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act. Over time, their mandate has extended to tackling air and noise pollution and managing hazardous waste. However, environmental regulation has rarely kept pace with the demands of the post-liberalisation economy. The SPCBs haven't just failed to fill up their sanctioned strength. They have also not done justice to their mandate by failing to rope in an adequate number of independent scientists in pollution control exercises. The autonomy of these agencies on technical issues is often compromised because civil servants and officials with a background in government, and not experts, hold most of the top posts. Moreover, the terms of the chairperson and member secretaries of these agencies vary from a year to three years — only in rare cases have these officials held a position for more than five years. Such short tenures are not ideal for developing long-term pollution abatement plans.

These problems have persisted for decades. Yet, there has been scarcely any attempt to delineate their underlying causes. In the past five years, even as the Centre has embarked on ambitious clean air, waste management and water quality improvement projects, it and the state governments have devoted very little attention to improving regulatory efficiency. A start can be made by leveraging some of the expertise in the country's universities and technical institutions for environmental regulation. This could be a forerunner to increasing the financial and institutional autonomy of pollution control agencies.

## MOO DENG

As the baby pygmy hippo's viral fame shows, the rules of celebrity are the same for humans and animals

FOR WEEKS NOW, a baby pygmy hippo in Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Chonburi, Thailand, has been the darling of the internet. Inspiring a deluge of fan art and memes, photos and videos of Moo Deng have achieved a virality that, arguably, rivals those of pop singers and film actors.

The rules of the fame game, it would appear, apply equally to all celebrities, whether or not they're of the human variety. Take, for example, the fact that people are now drawing make-up inspiration from Moo Deng: From beauty influencers to a global cosmetics chain, there is a range of advice on how to use blush to achieve the exact peachy-pink tint of the baby hippo's chubby cheeks. Her home, the zoo, has of course planned a range of merchandise to capitalise on her fame, but her mug has already appeared on fan-created products all over the globe, leading the zoo to trademark her name and image. The craze for the celebrity selfie, too, has not left Moo Deng untouched: The surging crowds around her enclosure have led to her meet-and-greet window being cut to a mere five minutes.

But if fame can be intense and unrelenting, it is also, almost universally, fleeting. By the next season, there will be a new flavour and the scrutiny of adoring fans, online and offline, will shift to another adorable animal. Already, there is a new kid on the block in the shape of a baby king penguin named Pesto in Melbourne Zoo who, with his hefty 22-kg frame and fluffy down, is on his way to viral social media fame. For Moo Deng, a future of chewing grass in obscurity could be a blessing.



RAJEEV LOCHAN

ARUNA VASUDEV'S MULTIDIMENSIONAL personality made her truly irreplaceable. Remembered essentially for her immense contribution to the domain of cinema, especially Asian cinema, she had many other intriguing facets in her personality that contributed to her being recognised as a legend in her own time.

She wore her various accolades with immense ease and was an affectionate, insightful, and social personality who, it appears to me, had a deep sense of purpose. Perhaps this purpose was to share, communicate and showcase diverse sensitivities in an experiential and selfless manner. She was always more interested in pioneering interventions rather than celebrity status. Her writings and engagements reflected a deep critical and aesthetic bearing, rather than a factual articulation of techniques of the craft and its medium of representation. She looked at Asian cinema essentially as an art form, with a firm commitment to experiencing, exploring and showcasing to the rest of the world its strength and vitality. She endeavoured to present the "Asian essence" to Asians and Asian ingenuity and uniqueness to the rest of the world. This earned her a special position and stature internationally. She had a single-minded aim and vision.

Her assimilative capacity, her aesthetic strength, and sensitivity in every aspect of social and creative expression perhaps emanated from her being an artist and

## THE ARUNA VASUDEV I KNEW

With a larger artistic vision, she brought together people and sensibilities

Her assimilative capacity, her aesthetic strength, and her sensitivity in every aspect of social and creative expression perhaps emanated from her being an artist and thinker at heart with a wide range of interests and engagements. As a result, the innumerable gatherings at her residence had *rasiks* from the varied walks of life that engaged her fancy — politics, culture, creative writing, poetry, dance, theatre etc.

Perhaps what pleased her the most was the interactive fertility of the interdisciplinary, where new ideas and possibilities emerged. She handled these with ease, glamour and elan. She was a real queen, her husky voice calling and inviting many of us to her gatherings, saying, "... have called only a few friends." One realised only later that one was amongst a large group, of a size and scale that one could hardly comprehend. All this was part of her *niswarth* (selfless) agenda in binding people and sensibilities together with her larger ambition and purpose. Assimilating aesthetics, diverse sensibilities, theoretical studies in their realisation mode is what she achieved! This did not limit itself to the regional, but extended to the international in the true spirit of a cultural emissary, with a holistic vision of life and creative pursuits.

Our personal association with Aruna went back over two decades or more — particularly for my wife and a group of mutual friends. This small group of family and friends spent an enriching time together, observing, experiencing, drawing, painting, and interacting. Although they seldom exhibited, this exercise was more an engagement with the "inner self"; essentially

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*swanta sukhaya* (self-satisfaction). The intention was not to seek worldly appreciation — as a true *rasik*, each was pursuing the larger context of the subliminal creative expression through the medium of "Sumi-e", the Japanese concept of creative expression that relates to the inner vitality of creative thinking and its representation.

It is evident that Aruna's involvement with Buddhism served a meaningful purpose in her life which transcended material gains. Although she led her life on her own terms and conditions, the larger meaning of existence had a deeper metaphoric purpose which, when viewed in totality, reveals how to be a pioneer, explore the unexplored, unify sensibilities and celebrate life with ease, poise, and sensitivity — all of which Aruna achieved.

Alas, that husky, affectionate, ever-welcoming voice fell into eternal silence on September 5. When I last saw her at her cremation, her face wore a smile. The word "aruna", as part of its literal meaning, represents the charioteer of the Sun god. In her life, Aruna was the charioteer of the Asian film movement, a true seeker with an Asian spirit and the zest to share it with the rest of the world. Aruna, you will always be remembered for your poise, elegance, sincerity, and vision.

The writer is an artist and former director, National Gallery of Modern Art

## SEPTEMBER 25, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### GOLDEN TEMPLE TALKS

NEGOTIATIONS ON THE Golden Temple complex issue appear to be nearing a solution as Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a second meeting with President Zail Singh in the last three days. Home Minister P V Narasimha Rao was also present. Over 30 Punjab Congress (I) MLAs pledged with them that the Golden Temple complex should be handed over to the high priests and the Army withdrawn.

### FOR PEACE IN REGION

THE PRIME MINISTER stressed the need for increased vigilance in the Indian Ocean in

view of the changing security environment around India. Inaugurating the annual senior naval officers' conference, the Prime Minister warned that the situation in the Indian Ocean was not one of mere confrontation between the superpowers. The presence of other nations' navies did not augur well for the peace and stability of the region.

### HISTORIC RESOLUTION

PROBABLY FOR THE first time in the history of the state, the Andhra Pradesh Cabinet adopted a resolution against former Governor Ram Lal. The Cabinet expressed "deep sorrow and concern" over Ram Lal's action in having ignored

the advice of the council of ministers tendered to him on August 15 to summon the Legislative Assembly three days later.

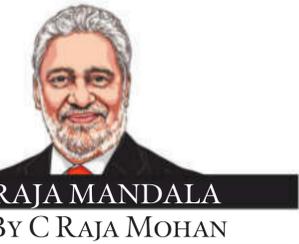
### US CHANGES TUNE

US PRESIDENT, RONALD Reagan, who had not long ago denounced the Soviet Union as an "evil empire" signalled a flexibility in US's attitude towards Moscow by announcing his readiness to enter into "constructive negotiations" with the Soviets. "We recognise that there is no sane alternative to negotiations on arms control...between our two nations which have the capacity to destroy civilisation as we know it," President Reagan said.



# Tech diplomacy 4.0

Modi government's progress with the US is not the first time Delhi has put technology on the top of its agenda. But today, domestic, external factors are coming together to facilitate a deepening partnership



**RAJA MANDALA**  
BY C RAJA MOHAN

WHICHEVER WAY ONE cuts it, there is no missing the centrality and intensity of technological cooperation in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's just-concluded visit to the United States. Technology has been at the centre of Modi's bilateral interactions with President Joe Biden, the minilateral summit of the Quad leaders, his interaction with the US CEOs, and the address to the United Nations Summit of the Future.

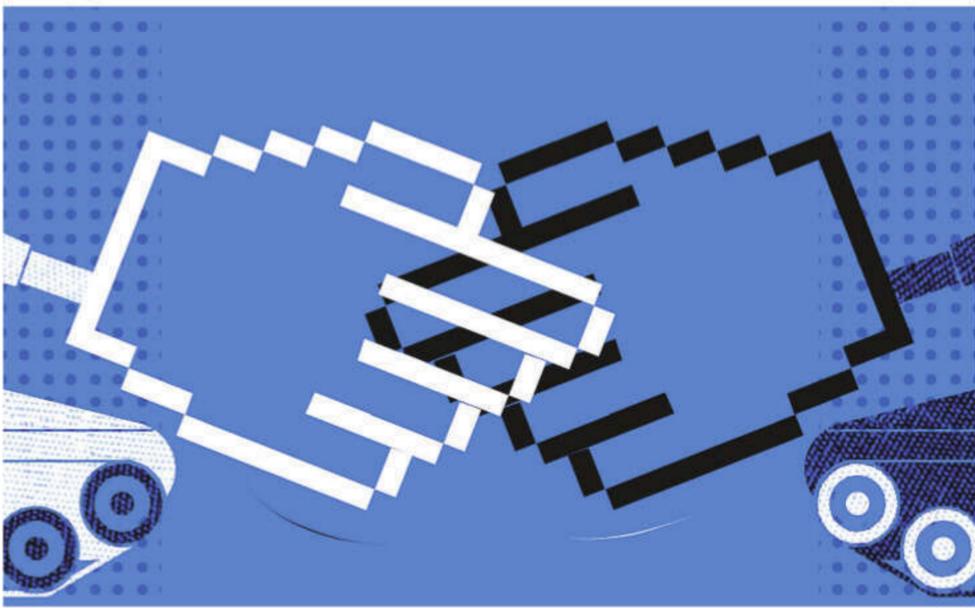
The outcomes from the PM's technology diplomacy are expansive — you have to be a real nerd to go through the long joint statements issued by the PM in the bilateral with Biden and the Quad summit and a tech policy wonk to absorb the meaning of the range of new initiatives. They cover areas ranging from semiconductors to biotechnology, telecom to artificial intelligence, clean energy to quantum computing, and small and modular nuclear reactors to robotics. They cover both advanced civilian and military applications and are bound to contribute to the modernisation of India's techno-industrial base.

This is not the first time though that technology has figured at the top of India's national strategy and diplomacy. There have been at least three earlier occasions in independent India's history when technology took centre-stage. Each of those phases ended without a realisation of India's full possibilities because internal and external factors had severely constrained technology strategies. Today, the domestic and the external are coming together to turn the fourth phase of India's technology diplomacy into a consequential one for India's security and prosperity.

The NDA government's new focus on building advanced technology capabilities, Washington's quest for capable partners amid the deepening rivalry with Beijing, and the effort to rearrange global supply chains are driving India on the one hand and the US on the other. Technology has become an important focus of India's engagement not just with the US but several countries including France, Germany, Britain, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, and the European Union.

Back in the 1950s, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru put special emphasis on gaining access to advanced technologies as a key driver of India's economic modernisation. Together with Homi Bhabha, Nehru reached out to the US and other Western powers to successfully lay the foundations for the development of nuclear and space technologies in India. The US also became a major supporter of the Green Revolution through collaboration in agricultural technology. The geopolitics of the moment — the perception of India as a democratic alternative to communist China — as well as the spirit of "scientific internationalism" and "developmentalism" in the US lent much-needed momentum to Delhi's technology diplomacy.

By the 1970s, the momentum began to



CR Sasikumar

flatter amidst India's economic populism, anti-Americanism, growing bureaucratisation of science and technology, marginalisation of India's private sector, Delhi's drift towards Moscow, India's nuclear test of 1974, and the consolidation of the global nonproliferation regime that steadily reduced the space for technology diplomacy.

The space that existed in the then non-sensitive areas was treated with disdain in Delhi. Recall that Delhi made it hard for IBM to stay in India. And its lack of interest drove US semiconductor makers to Singapore and Malaysia. Meanwhile, the large number of scientists and technologists trained in Indian universities and IITs, frustrated at the lack of opportunities at home, stepped out and walked through America's open door to technological talent. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia's salience in India's defence, atomic energy and outer space programmes began to grow in the 1970s.

To their credit, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi made a big effort in the 1980s to correct the failures of the first phase by putting technological cooperation back at the heart of India-US relations and exploring the space that existed outside the realm of the non-proliferation regime. Rajiv Gandhi's strong technological orientation and his special emphasis on telecom and computing capabilities provided the political energy at the top to push for greater technological collaboration with the US. While the second phase produced some significant results, structural constraints — internal bureaucratic resistance and the external constraints driven by the non-proliferation regime — limited progress.

India's nuclear tests of 1998 made matters worse as the US imposed additional sanctions, but they also persuaded Washington to seek a long overdue reconciliation with India on nuclear issues. The Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh governments sought to build on this opportunity and the big moment came in 2005 with the India-US civil nuclear initiative. But deep divisions within the political class and opposi-

The return of a majority government to power in 2014 unleashed fresh energy into India's technology diplomacy in the fourth phase. For one, the Modi government began to tie up some loose ends of the US nuclear deal and put digital and green technologies at the top of the policy agenda in the first term. The technological focus expanded to include AI and semiconductors in the second term. These initiatives were in tune with the technological revolution unfolding in the world and have acquired fresh momentum in the third term. On the American side, the growing recognition of the challenges presented by China under George W Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Biden led to the expanding investment in the defence and technological partnership with India. This culminated in the initiative on critical and emerging technologies (ICET). Last Saturday's joint statement at Wilmington adds to the broad framework for strategic and technological cooperation unveiled during Modi's state visit to Washington in June 2023.

The shared US and Indian geopolitical interest in stabilising the Asian balance of power has been reinforced by the common desire to reduce excessive global economic dependence on China, and build technology coalitions among like-minded countries. The Indian "brain drain" to the US from the late 1960s has now become a living technological bridge between the two nations.

The fourth phase of India's technology diplomacy has done well to seize the new international possibilities, but it needs to be buttressed at home with the long overdue reform of the science and technology sectors. Otherwise, the internal bureaucratic resistance will inevitably lead to sub-optimal outcomes.

The writer is visiting research professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



**LAKSHMI PURI**

# An Indian compass for future

At UN, it championed peace, global goods and needs of the Global South

INDIA HAS AN unbroken, civilisational heritage of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam. This ethos was imprinted on to our G20 presidency by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The country has the largest youth population in the world, it is the largest and most vibrant democracy, and is technologically future-facing. Intergenerational solidarity is also intrinsic to Indians. India thus has the greatest stake in any collective, global envisioning of a perfect future for humanity. This is what the Pact for the Future (PFF), the Declaration on Future Generations (DFG) and the Global Digital Compact (GDC) adopted at the UN Summit of the Future on September 23 attempts.

PM Modi joined 142 counterparts at the Summit and positioned India as a *vishvamiitra* representing a sixth of humanity. He emphasised India's vision of human-centric development and success in SDGs, DPI and solar energy, which he offered to share. He brought the message of the G20 New Delhi Declaration (NDLD) and amplified the voice of the Global South. He urged eschewing war and addressing threats from new arenas — terrorism, cyber, maritime and space. Warning that reform is the key to relevance, he pointed to the admission of the African Union to the G20. "Global action must match global ambition" he urged.

The UN Secretary-General admitted the "UN can't build a future for our grandchildren with the institutions of our grandparents" and that the "multilateral system is gridlocked in dysfunction". This crisis contributes to and reflects the emerging world disorder. Global flashpoints such as the NATO-Ukraine/Russia

conflict, the West vs China cold war and the war in Gaza are of such intensity that leaders are invoking the unthinkable spectre of a nuclear armageddon and another World War. The UN is unable to prevent, mediate or resolve them, but is caught in the middle or made to pick up the humanitarian pieces.

The international community seems to have taken its eyes off the terrorism ball. A furious rearmament race is on. False narratives and foreign information manipulation and interference around democracy and human rights is being used perversely to bring about regime changes in developing countries. Meanwhile, the world is lagging in 88 per cent of the SDG targets. Extreme weather events are causing devastation due to climate change.

Much-needed financing from donors and unreformed and underfunded Multilateral Financial Institutions (MFIs), critical green technologies and debt relief have not materialised for developing countries. There is a serious solidarity deficit, undermining multilateralism by resorting to coercive unilateralism, transactional bilateralism, plurilateralism, minilateralism and regionalism.

Against this background, the Summit represented "a once-in-a-generation opportunity to help rebuild trust and bring outdated multilateral institutions and frameworks into line with today's world, based on equity and solidarity."

The PFF's 58 actions partially did this by addressing issues in the global public good areas of conflict prevention, peacemaking, disarmament and counter-terrorism; SDGs, environmental protection and climate action and its financing; human rights and democracy including gender equality; disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response, and science, technology, digital revolution and transforming global governance.

The Summit demonstrated the convening, consensus building and norm power of the UN to get governments to come together. It reiterated key earlier principles and pledges, vowed to implement them and assumed some new responsibilities. Countries got to "prevision" the future perils and possibilities to better shape the present. However, sceptics point to the Summit being more about "why" and "what" but not how to operationalise and enforce these "soft law" commitments. For instance, the PFF vowed to "take bold, ambitious, accelerated, just and transformative actions" to achieve SDGs and climate action. What was missing was the call the NDLD made "to scale up SDG and climate finance for developing countries from billions to trillions" and pin down the amount needed.

India has reason to be satisfied with the commitment "to pursue a future free from terrorism" and "violent extremism conducive to terrorism" in every way and at all levels including through revitalising the Convention against Terrorism. It condemned terrorism "in all its forms and manifestations committed by whomever, wherever, whenever. All terrorist acts are criminal and unjustifiable regardless of motivation or how their perpetrators may seek to justify them." UN mechanisms, however, are still hobbled by

donor money and agendas.

An elaborate text pledged to make the UNSC "more representative, inclusive, transparent, efficient, effective, democratic and accountable," and enunciated principles for expansion and reform including Africa being given priority and implicitly presaging the inclusion of developing countries like India. While the US was very positive, the other P5 and usual spoilers prevented any time-bound, text-based breakthrough. Only a larger grand bargain or a two-thirds majority vote in the UNGA may break the 35-year logjam.

The Global Digital Compact is a significant normative outcome and takes forward India's G20 thrust on bridging the digital divide, fostering the digital economy and digital public infrastructure for achieving SDGs. It proposed the establishment of a multi-disciplinary Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and a Global Dialogue on AI Governance.

We now have a compass, however imperfect, for guiding us to our one future as one earth, one family. If countries work together, rising above "narrow domestic walls", we will be able to right wrongs, survive future shocks and thrive as a people and planet. The UN can't make miracles unless "we the people", the UN Secretariat and the member states believe so and dare to act. As a Sanskrit saying goes, "Yad Bhavam, Tad Bhavati" — you become what you believe.

The writer is a former assistant secretary-general at the United Nations and the former deputy executive director of UN Women

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"By a whisker, Mr Scholz's party won a regional vote on Sunday that doubled as an unofficial referendum on his government. But after a tumultuous month, it feels like a pyrrhic victory."  
— THE GUARDIAN

# Making campus equal, excellent

The problem of universities having low fees and high costs can be resolved through endowments, scholarships and cross-subsidies



**MANISH SABHARWAL AND PRAMATH SINHA**

THE GOLDEN RULE of modern higher education — those with the gold rule — has infuriated teachers, parents and policymakers for centuries because making universities equal (low fees) conflicts with excellence (high costs). Public funding breaks this tyranny, but India's public debt — already 85 per cent of GDP — can't expand indefinitely or infinitely without us being irresponsible ancestors. Thankfully, the conflict between equality and excellence is being broken by new non-profit Indian universities that raise money for endowments and scholarships while using differential student fees to cross-subsidise. Over time, these universities will improve our science and technology game, reduce Indian enrollment in mediocre overseas universities, and raise international student enrollment in India.

A great university has low fees and high costs (quality faculty, rigorous research and a nice campus). In contrast, low fees and low costs create low quality, while high fees and high costs create exclusion. In theory, public universities have what Hungarian economist Janos Kornai called soft budget constraints — they can get higher government allocations irrespective of performance. In practice, even high-quality public universities in rich places like California, Canada and England face brutal budget cuts because of the cost disease (productivity in education can't rise as fast as costs do), policy-mandated fee caps, and tighter visa regimes for full-fee-paying international students. Higher education regulators in England and Canada suggest 40 and 50 per cent of their institutions will run a deficit this year. US universities have an endowment of over \$800 billion but massive inequality: 20 of its 5,000+ universities account for 50 per cent of this money.

Our civilisation recognised the power of learning centuries ago — *Vidya Dadati Vinayam, Vinaya Dadati Patram* (knowledge gives humility, which gives capability) — but public funding faces the tyranny of dividing money between K-12 schooling, vocational training and universities. All three matter, but the first two deliver more inclusive public goods and face financing market failures. Colleges create wage premiums and have more options for funding. Consequently, about 75 per cent of India's 40 million university students study in non-profit, non-government institutions (only 25 per cent of America's 18 million and 15 per cent of the UK's three million students do so). The global resource challenges of government-funded higher education will only increase with ageing, technology's deflationary impact creating employed poverty, and a ravenous welfare state.

*Empire of Ideas* by William Kirby suggests leaving out universities from studies of global political and economic power in the last three centuries has been a mistake. In the 17th and 18th centuries, France dominated Europe more by its ideas than military prowess. Elites from Cambridge and Oxford ensured many British-modelled institutions in their colonies. German universities became the destination of choice for scholars because they redefined what universities

could be. And the "American century" was partly fuelled by the prestige and alumni of its universities. Kirby's thesis reinforces our belief that 20 Indian universities among the world's top 100 are a national security goal for the next decade because *shastra & shastra* (knowledge and weapons), *vidya & vikas* (learning and development), and *praudyogiki & pratibha* (technology and talent) are inseparable.

Ironically, the golden rule of education is being broken by enlightened gold that recognises supporting higher education improves India's infrastructure of opportunity. A new crop of innovative Indian non-profit universities are diversifying their funding beyond fees. Only 4 per cent of the costs of Azim Premji University are met by fees — this is similar to central government-funded Delhi University — because it started with more endowment than what the US's prestigious Brown University had accumulated over a century. The endowment raised by the Indian School of Business (ISB) from multiple donors has allowed it to innovate and take the long view; it ranks highly in global business school rankings without offering an MBA "degree". Over 200 donors have enabled Ashoka University to offer 24 per cent of students a 100 per cent tuition waiver and 60 per cent some financial aid.

The biggest challenge for non-profit universities is convincing philanthropy to fund revenue expenses because it is easy to confuse university buildings with building universities. However, software trumps hardware; what makes universities great is the quality of their faculty. The coming tsunami of AI and virtual reality promises to revolutionise the role of teachers and will finally — and thankfully — make that awful noun and verb "lecturer" obsolete. The best teachers in the next few decades will use technology but recognise that humans have an unfair advantage in being human. They will combine being an *adhyapak* (information provider), *upadhyay* (combiner of information and knowledge), *pandit* (deep subject knowledge), *acharya* (imparts specific skills), *drushta* (visionary view of a subject) and *guru* (awakens potential). However, the notion that the spiritual rewards of teaching compensate for fair financial rewards is flawed if our goal is attracting quality talent and retaining them in India. While the new wave of non-profit universities has built a strong track record of not loading capital expenditures onto fees, the next frontier for them is raising untied funding for operating costs. Early trends in scholarship funding commitments and research grants augur well.

In his autobiography, *Avoid Boring People*, James Watson, the co-discoverer of DNA's structure, reflects on a lifetime in science and suggests, "Don't back schemes that demand miracles". The first best option for financing universities is a massive expansion of government funding, but that scheme demands a miracle. Life is second best at best. We must acknowledge government budgets' acute and chronic constraints and recognise that school and vocational education have higher moral claims on that finite money pool. Instead of more cooks in the kitchen, let's try a new recipe: Non-profit universities offering equality and excellence through cross-subsidised fees, scholarships, and endowments. It is an equal and excellent future for higher education that must be encouraged and expanded.

The writers are co-founders of Teamleap Services and Ashoka University, respectively

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### FOR AN EQUAL STATE

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Social justice must include her" (IE, September 24). Kerala has been at the forefront of social justice by doing away with centuries-old feudalism — thanks to the vision of CM E M S Nambodiripad. But the state has failed to extend that spirit of social justice to women, as is evident from the findings of the Hema Committee report. Women play second fiddle to men in every field in our country, and cinema is no exception. The ruling dispensation must be reminded that it is its job to ensure fairness and equality everywhere — including the film industry. It needs to ensure that a woman complaining of sexual exploitation by a man wielding clout is not deprived of her job.  
SH Quadri, Bikaner

### CHESS CHAMPIONS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "The medal sweep" (IE, September 24). History has been made in Indian chess with Team India winning gold in both the men and women's categories at Budapest. With this achievement, India has joined a se-

lect club of nations, including China and the erstwhile Soviet Union — both of whom clinched the golden double in the same edition of the Olympiad. The light kindled by Viswanathan Anand has increased its glow manifold through his worthy successors. The victories show India's growing prowess in chess.  
SS Paul, Nadia

### A BLOT ON HISTORY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, "What Manipur needs" (IE, September 23). The Manipur conflict remains a textbook case of how not to handle an internal security matter. Marred by shocking violation of human rights, anarchy seems to be the new normal in the state. What's worse is that government machinery is solely responsible for not containing this violence in time. Overhauling the unified command and state government leadership along with initiating a dialogue between communities can bring a ray of hope and help to address the catastrophe. But this will need iron will from the Centre as well as judicial intervention at this juncture.  
Sagar Borade, Chhattisgarh

# Opinion

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2024



## AUDITING PUBLIC SERVICE

President Droupadi Murmu

“In an increasingly technology-driven world, more and more public services are being delivered using technology. Audit, therefore, needs to keep up with technological evolution in order to be able to perform its oversight functions effectively”

## When riches fall short

The 16th Finance Commission should check erosion of states' fiscal autonomy and incentivise performance

**UNLIKE THE 15TH FINANCE** Commission (FC), whose terms of reference was a source of controversy, the 16th FC has a clear mandate to ensure a fair distribution of fiscal resources between the Centre and states. Recognising that states that collectively undertake 60% of general government expenditure suffered a resource crunch more severe than the Centre's, the 14th FC made an attempt to correct the imbalance. It raised the untied transfers (share from divisible pool of taxes) to states by an unprecedented 10 percentage points to 42% (this was largely retained by the 15th FC). To be sure, even this wasn't a big tilt in the balance, as the mandated higher tax transfers came with a cut in assorted (tied) grants. In the end, it was only a compositional or qualitative shift, rather than a quantitative one.

To make matters worse for states, the Centre, mid-way through the implementation of the 14 FC award, resorted to flagrant use of cesses and surcharges, to bolster the tax resources it is not obligated to devolve to states. This constricted the fiscal space available to states as the proceeds from cesses jumped from 8.8% of the Centre's gross tax receipts in FY13 to as high as 30.5% in FY19, thanks mainly to the hefty increases in such taxes on auto fuels. As a result, the states' share in the Centre's gross tax receipts fell from 36.6% in FY19 to a little over 29% in FY21, before improving marginally. Though it may be argued that the cess funds are also being spent in the country (states), the assumption of the extra fiscal space by the Centre impinges on states' fiscal and policy autonomy. Moreover, as the Comptroller and Auditor General has pointed out repeatedly, there has been rampant "short-crediting" of the proceeds of various cesses to the designated funds — to the extent of ₹ 1.1 lakh crore in FY19, for instance.

There are grave fears among the states about how the fiscal relations are going to be defined by the 16th FC. The commission set out to work on its mandate, at a time when the Supreme Court's Constitution bench is reviewing the Centre-state fiscal paradigm, at the instance of a few state governments. These states allege "overreach" by the Centre, and seek protection against its "unwarranted" controls on their borrowing limits, etc. Also, the five southern states are peeved at their share of tax devolution declining from 21% during the 11th FC period to 15.8% in the 15th FC, despite their share in the gross domestic product (GDP) being over 30%. They are in a pique particularly because their past (better) performance is working against them and threatening to subvert further progress, as the FCs seek to address regional deprivations.

Fiscal resources ought to be disbursed with the overarching objective that states as a whole get due share of fiscal resources, and reasonable autonomy on how to use them. Some rewards must also exist for performance. The resources needed for special aids to the "backward" states could be mobilised by designating a part of the cess proceeds for this purpose, curbs on the Centre's spending on state subjects, etc. rather than via steps that would do material damage to other states. At the core of the problem is, for sure, the wide gap between the resources and the development needs, which needs to be bridged by raising the tax-GDP ratio.

## TECHPROOF EXPRESS

BRAIN IMPLANTS ARE TRANSFORMING LIVES FOR PARAPLEGICS

# Bridging minds and machines

## SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist  
By invitation



**IMAGINE CONTROLLING A** computer with nothing more than your thoughts. Or better yet, imagine asking Alexa to turn on the lights — not with your voice, but with a direct mental command. This may sound like science fiction, but it's rapidly becoming the science of today. Brain implants are paving the way for revolutionary technologies that allow people with disabilities to interact with the world in ways previously thought impossible. For paraplegics and others with similar conditions, this could mean regaining autonomy over their lives, including communication, mobility, and everyday tasks.

At the heart of this innovation is a field called brain-computer interfaces (BCIs). These devices, once the stuff of futurist speculation, show real-world potential in restoring communication, control, and even sensation for those with physical limitations. The most exciting recent breakthroughs involve pairing BCIs with digital assistants like Alexa and Siri to offer seamless interaction and accessibility. Brain implants work by interpreting the brain's electrical activity. Neurons communicate via tiny electrical impulses, and BCIs capture these signals using microelectrodes implanted in the brain. These signals are decoded and translated into commands controlling external devices, such as computers, robotic limbs, or home appliances.

This technology can offer profound benefits for paraplegics who have lost the ability to move or control parts of their body due to spinal cord injury or disease. The brain can send movement-related commands, but the severed spinal cord prevents these messages from reaching their intended targets, like the arms or legs. BCIs step in, essentially bypassing the damaged pathways and providing a new communication channel. One of the most striking advancements has been BCIs' ability to integrate

with digital assistants. Companies like Neuralink (founded by Elon Musk), Synchron, and Blackrock Neurotech are at the forefront of developing BCI technology that could soon allow people with paraplegia to control smart home devices and communicate digitally by simply thinking. In 2021, Synchron, an emerging leader in the field, successfully implanted their device in the brain of a man with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). This degenerative disease gradually robs people of muscle control, including the ability to speak. The implant allowed him to send text messages using only his thoughts. This device, known as the Stentrode, is less invasive than many other brain implants, threading a small electrode-laden stent into the brain via blood vessels. Once in place, it captures the electrical impulses corresponding to movement or intent and translates them into digital signals.

Now, *Wired* magazine reports that Synchron has, on an experimental basis, been able to seamlessly allow paraplegics who volunteered to command both their phones and Alexa to help them operate phones, tablets, and computers with their thoughts to surf the internet or compose emails. With the Amazon integration, they can control Alexa with a Fire tablet to turn the lights on and off at home, watch TV, make video calls, play music, control their Ring security camera, read books on

Kindle, and shop on Amazon ([bit.ly/47Dhrjn](https://bit.ly/47Dhrjn)).

This isn't just a convenience; for paraplegics or individuals with locked-in syndrome — where they cannot move or speak at all — this technology represents a lifeline to independence.

For many paraplegics, the most pressing challenge isn't just regaining control over their environment but re-establishing communication. ALS and similar conditions often leave individuals trapped inside their bodies, fully conscious but unable to move or speak. BCIs offer an elegant and profound solution: a direct mental connection to a computer that can express their thoughts. Similarly, BCIs can allow paraplegics to control motorised wheelchairs or robotic arms. By envisioning the movement, the brain's motor cortex sends out signals interpreted by the implant and converted into real-world actions. This ability can grant mobility, another crucial aspect of independence, to those who have lost it.

Integrating BCIs with AI-driven digital assistants is a natural next step in improving accessibility. While digital assistants are already widespread — controlling everything from lighting to reminders in modern homes — they require voice commands or touch inputs, both of which may be inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. By linking BCI systems directly with

these assistants, users can think their commands instead. This provides a remarkable degree of independence in everyday life.

Furthermore, digital assistants' conversational nature adds a social layer to the technology. Instead of relying on caregivers for every small task, paraplegics and others with motor impairments can engage directly with the world around them — on their terms.

While the promise of brain implants is enormous, there are challenges to overcome. Decoding brain signals is still an imprecise science. The brain generates vast amounts of data, and distinguishing the correct signal from background noise can be difficult. Moreover, ethical concerns surrounding the invasive nature of implants and the potential for misuse of personal neural data remain hotly debated topics.

As BCIs advance, developers are also focused on making the devices more reliable, long-lasting, and less invasive. The Neuralink device, for instance, aims to be fully wireless and minimally invasive, using flexible threads inserted into the brain by a precision robot. This could make the technology safer and more accessible for widespread use.

The merger of brain implants and digital assistants paints an exciting picture for the future. For paraplegics, these technologies provide a crucial pathway to regaining control over their environment, enhancing communication, and restoring a sense of agency. The ability to control devices purely by thinking is an extraordinary leap forward — not just in accessibility but in what it means to be human in a digital age.

As research progresses and technology becomes more refined, the prospect of a world where paraplegics can communicate, control, and interact with their surroundings as easily as their able-bodied peers is no longer a distant dream but a soon-to-be reality. Cheers to that!

### Ethical concerns on the invasive nature of implants and the potential for misuse of personal neural data remain hotly debated topics

Integrating BCIs with AI-driven digital assistants is a natural next step in improving accessibility. While digital assistants are already widespread — controlling everything from lighting to reminders in modern homes — they require voice commands or touch inputs, both of which may be inaccessible to people with physical disabilities. By linking BCI systems directly with

## Good luck to Qualcomm in getting Intel Inside

**THERE'S OPPORTUNISM** — AND there's Qualcomm Inc.'s approach to buy Intel Corp. The acquisitive semiconductor giant has an opening to attempt such a momentous deal thanks to the yawning gap between their market capitalisations. The snag is that many obstacles remain to a successful transaction.

Intel is the legacy name in the chip industry. Qualcomm would make history gobbling it up. That is surely the main attraction. "Intel Inside" would become sadly ironic. There's been quite a turn in fortunes on both sides. Intel shares are down more than 50% since the beginning of 2024, and the company was valued at \$93 billion at Friday's close before the *Wall Street Journal* reported Qualcomm's interest. Qualcomm stock is up nearly 20%, valuing it at \$188 billion. Only in January, Qualcomm was worth a lot less than its target. Now it can contemplate a deal where it would be in the driver's seat.

The business justification is more prosaic. Qualcomm would gain diversification, as *Bloomberg Intelligence* points out: A combination would reduce Qualcomm's reliance on handsets — currently about 75% of sales — by adding revenue from chips for personal computers and data centres. There's also the fact that Intel appears to be in a financial trough after years of underperformance relative to key rival Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. The US firm is forecast to be barely profitable this year, with operating profit recovering to \$3 billion next year and more than \$7 billion in 2026, according to Goldman Sachs Group Inc. research. Other analysts see a yet faster recovery. What better time to pounce?

Qualcomm's approach is for all of the chipmaker, *Bloomberg News* reported. Clearly, it may not be able to keep 100%. Asset sales will be required to assuage antitrust regulators. That's partially helpful as it shrinks the overall size of a transaction. But it brings the risk of having to take fire-sale prices on disposals. There is unlikely to be an easy preemptive fix. Consider Kroger Co. and Albertsons Companies Inc. — their grocery union two years ago was announced with a plug-and-play antitrust spinoff. Only last month did the Federal Trade Commission case come to court.

It's not just regulators that need be assuaged. Why should Intel, led by Pat Gelsinger, play ball? No company's management team or shareholders like doing a deal when the share price is on its knees — unless there's a very high premium or certain value creation on offer through trading into the enlarged company.

Intel has taken the pain of a dividend suspension to fund investment in a turnaround. The stock plunged nearly 30% in August as a result, and the shares have barely recovered from that point. It's often better to wait for shares in your takeover target to recover a bit from a blow. The shareholders may then be less likely to feel taken advantage of. Already, potential alternative courses are surfacing for Intel that raise questions about whether a takeover is the necessary or even lowest-risk solution to its woes. Buyout firm Apollo Global Management Inc. is proposing a \$5 billion "equity like" investment in Intel, *Bloomberg News* reported on Sunday. That could make a non-Qualcomm future more appealing.

Above all, Intel is a target whose deep operational and strategic challenges may not be solved simply with new ownership. The key to success is whether Qualcomm could run its desired purchase any better. There may be a bigger question mark over that when you're branching away from your core.

There are some echoes here with Capital One Financial Corp.'s tilt at credit-card peer Discover Financial Services in February — another deal aided by a divergence in share prices after the target had a profit warning. That's also facing huge regulatory risks. The bottom line is that even with US trustbusters itching to fight seemingly every merger, the lure of opportunism outweighs the antitrust deterrent.

So there you have it. Buying Intel should require twin battles to win over the target and regulators, with the end result being a deal that looks risky strategically and financially. But it would cement Qualcomm's and Intel's places in the annals of tech and M&A.

## Time to increase your export hedges



## JAMAL MECKLAI

CEO, Mecklai Financial  
[www.mecklai.com](http://www.mecklai.com)

Companies that have held on to a pre-defined process, hedging certain amounts on pre-set signals, have generally seen very strong results

**THE DOLLAR INDEX** is threatening to break below its support at 100.80, and when — more likely than if — it does, the next stop (at least, technically speaking) is around 98. With many analysts and the Fed itself talking about another 1% of rate cuts before the year-end (on top of the large 0.5% hike on September 18), and, of course, the madness surrounding Trump and the upcoming election, the break could come fairly soon.

The rupee, which had climbed off the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) floor of 84 a week or so ago, has strengthened almost vertically since the rate hike, and it, too, is threatening a break-out. It is just 20-25 paise below a relatively long-term resistance and if/when that breaks, we could see substantially more gains. It is important to note that since January 2022, the rupee has twice strengthened by ₹ 2 (to the dollar) in a matter of weeks. In fact, if we go further back (to 2017), rupee strength has been much more substantial (5-10%) and has persisted for much longer (sometimes as long as 6-8 months).

Of course, the RBI, which has had to change its intervention direction suddenly in the past week, will certainly be in there to "smooth the volatility" and may even try to draw a line in the sand at, say 83. On the other hand, buying dollars to prevent rupee appreciation has the unpleasant side-effect of pouring rupees

into the market. The increase in liquidity would make it that much more difficult to keep food price inflation controlled. And, given that this is the singularly most difficult issue facing the government, particularly with the state elections around the corner, the RBI may end up stuck between a rock and a hard place if USD weakness overseas predominates.

Over the last two or three years, we have seen several companies reducing or completely stopping the hedging of exports, generally because the sharp fall of the rupee in 2022-23 rendered many of their hedges out of the money. To my mind, simply closing off hedging is never a good strategy because (a) you are carrying unlimited risk, and (b) it becomes very difficult to take a decision

on when to restart and determine how to go about it.

We have found that companies that have held on to a pre-defined process, hedging certain amounts on pre-set signals, have generally seen very strong results even after factoring in poor performance in a few quarters.

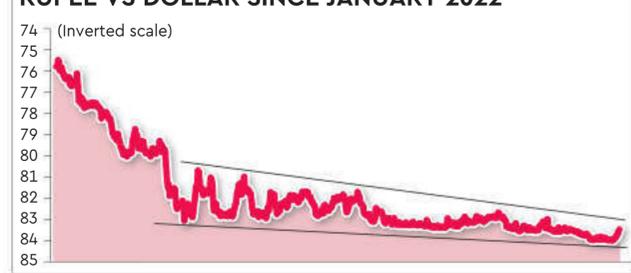
We have a client who has been using MHP, our structured hedging programme, for many years. Between June 2017 and April 2024, the rupee depreciated from 64.75 to 83.75, a total decline of 29%. Over the same period, the average forward premium was 3.65%, which would have provided a cumulative gain of about 25% on simply selling forward. While on the surface, this argues against hedging, the reality

— as experienced by our client — is that following our systematic approach delivered handsome gains of 1.14% as compared to staying unhedged. And while the performance was somewhat volatile, over any of the running three fiscal years covered since 2017 — 2018-20, 2019-21, 2020-22, 2021-23, 2022-24 — the realisations were always higher than staying unhedged, albeit to varying degrees, making up the average.

The client, who had relatively large exports (averaging \$165 million per year) was able to pocket gains of nearly ₹102 crore over the seven-plus years — that's nearly ₹15 crore a year! On a unit basis, the gains worked out to ₹85 lakh for every \$10 million of exports. Again, and significantly, the mark to market of the hedges, which translates directly to the accounts, reflected an average quarterly gain of ₹19.9 crore. There were quarters of losses, to be sure, but it was well contained at only six quarters out of 28.

Given that the rupee is again showing some signs of strength it is, in our view, critical to immediately increase your export hedges. The fact that the premiums have also risen (and are very likely to rise further) is a reason to use a structured programme which could help you balance the conflicting forces — gains from higher premiums versus reduction of spot value as a result of a stronger rupee.

### RUPEE VS DOLLAR SINCE JANUARY 2022



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Attacks on Lebanon

In a single day, Israeli attacks killed over 500 people, including 50 children, in Lebanon. The world seems to have become immune to the killings of innocent civilians by Israel. The US call for de-escalation in the region is just paying lip service to peace, which is clear from its continuing supply of war weapons to Israel to use them as it wishes. India also adopts double standards; on the

one hand, it proclaims its "unwavering support" to the people of Palestine, and on the other, it exports weapons to Israel for use in the ongoing genocidal war. When the mighty attack the meek, the world cannot look away. It is important for countries to take a principled stand against war and put humanity above everything else. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said at the United Nations that the success of humanity does not lie in battlefields. But he is less than vocal in

condemning Israel for killing civilians, with scant regard for human life. —G David Milton, Maruthancode

### Options trade losses

Futures and options (F&O) is a zero-sum game, and which retail player can match the sophisticated algos used by the big players? It comes as no surprise that 91% of the retail players have been losing money in F&O trades, according to a Securities and Exchange Board of India report. The

authorities have done a good job with gambling apps by arresting those running them, but it is hard to do the same with futures. Nothing can stop those with an addiction for gambling. The best the government can do is to issue a mandatory warning for each trade on the lines of the warning on a pack of cigarettes, not that it has stopped many from smoking. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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Movies are a physical experience, and are remembered as such, stored up in bodily synapses that evade the thinking mind

Frederic Jameson

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

— Rammath Goenka

## MAJHI MUST CONTAIN ROT IN ODISHA LAW AND ORDER MACHINERY

SADLY, police brutality is not new in India. But the assault on an army officer and the alleged sexual abuse of his fiancée in a police station of Bhubaneswar has certainly taken it to a new low. The couple, harassed by a mob after a road rage incident, walked into Bharatpur police station on the city's outskirts to lodge a complaint and seek redress in the early hours of September 15. Hours later, the manner in which the two complainants ended up being booked themselves after having been illegally confined, humiliated and manhandled has left the country outraged and Odisha shamed.

When the protector turns predator on a justice seeker in a state capital, it symbolises that the law and order situation is in a perilous state. What happened with the army officer and the lawyer-restaurateur displayed the ugly innards of a system where the rot has set in for long. It was the previous BJD government that had systematically weakened the police machinery for its political interests. It created a parallel system and vested powers with a chosen few to run its dictum. Even police chiefs stopped to matter at some point of time. The structurally weak and unstable system was only waiting to implode.

The Mohan Majhi government has been at the receiving end for this deplorable incident. It has ordered a crime branch probe, suspended the errant officials and directed a judicial inquiry to be completed in 60 days. But it has clearly shown its ineptness on law and order. Busy fulfilling its election promises, it has grappled to contain multiple communal flare-ups and a spate of violent crimes. More than three months in the power now, it has not even been able to effect the customary reshuffle of senior police officials that has led to a precarious stagnancy across districts and major posts.

Blaming the previous government is not going to help the BJP administration on matters of deteriorating law and order. Its ecosystem's attempt to deflect criticism by naming and shaming its own officers will not work either. It needs to take firm control of the system and provide direction. And for that, Mohan Majhi, who is also the home minister, must step up. He can barely afford another such disaster, as it reflects poorly on his party nationally, too.

## MORE FOR ELDER CARE BEYOND HEALTH COVER

THE world's widest health cover recently got wider. The Union cabinet extended the Ayushman Bharat scheme to cover all senior citizens aged 70 and above. By the government's estimate, this would add about 6 crore beneficiaries to the 55 crore the scheme already covers.

Seniors in families that are already covered would get a personal top-up of ₹5 lakh. It's a much-needed step in the world's most populous country that is ageing fast and where health cover among elders is abysmally low. The timing is crucial, too—while one in every 10 Indians in 2022 was aged above 60, the share is expected to double by 2050.

One of the major beneficiaries of the extension will be women. About 58 percent of Indians above 70 are women and an overwhelming majority of them are widowed. Facing restricted mobility and more societal isolation than the men of their age—conditions that are known to aggravate age-related disorders—women are in greater need of such support. Another valuable input should come from the scheme's digital mission that aims to collate longitudinal health data of those insured. This can be of immense help to the government in planning resources and researchers in understanding diseases better.

All these would be laudable outcomes, but they should be seen as part of a longer journey. The care elders need go far beyond being able to afford basic healthcare. The National Policy on Senior Citizens of 2011 addresses dignity and prevention measures, apart from finance and mobility concerns. We must ask how the state health systems, that can expect a surge in demand, are gearing up to face it. The 2011 policy suggested building a community care network, for which we can learn from innovations in Japan and the Netherlands, where academic credit is given to students who spend time with elders. The insistence on Aadhaar should be given a second look, given that it has already kept millions from accessing other welfare schemes. If we really want to care for our elders, we cannot treat this as just another rights-based scheme where the onus is on the citizen to navigate the stodgy government machinery to claim what is due. We must make access as easy as possible.

### QUICK TAKE

#### CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISM

ISRAELI airstrikes have killed at least 558 people including 50 children across Lebanon this week. Benjamin Netanyahu's claim it was a "pre-emptive strike" is euphemism that qualifies as a crime of aggression under international law. Former CIA director Leon Panetta has called the explosion of paggers and walkie-talkies in civilian areas "a form of terrorism". One of the most galling aspects of this cruel aggression is Israel's targeted killing of journalists—in Lebanon as in Gaza. Its attack on Reuters journalist Issam Abdullah last October also injured six others. This Monday, a missile struck Fadi Boudia's home while he was broadcasting. The issue needs to be highlighted at the ongoing UN General Assembly.

THE Indian Constitution has a built-in mismatch between revenue-raising and expenditure responsibilities, and has provided for the institution of a Union Finance Commission (UFC) to address this problem with quinquennial reviews.

Although it wasn't a constitutional body, the erstwhile Planning Commission had powers to allocate resources to states and enjoyed considerable political clout. The UFC's tasks were compromised. With the abolition of the Planning Commission in 2014, the economy plunged into a market-mediated system, with its inherent bias towards regional imbalances and considerable changes in resource allocations.

The 16th Finance Commission is at a crossroads, particularly because its terms of reference (ToR) are not constrained by Article 280(3)(d) with 'any other matter in the interest of sound finance' and free from the burden of the pandemic. In this context, revisiting the design of the transfer system seems to be in order.

Restoring fiscal balance both vertical and horizontal to promote sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the critical constitutional goal of providing every citizen the minimum basic services of standard quality irrespective of their choice of residence is the key.

But inter-state disparities in per capita income and human development index (HDI) have widened since 1990. This makes the commission's task more onerous. It is in this context that I take up the question of rewards, performance and penalties as a strategic approach, with a focus on Kerala.

A well-designed transfer system to promote constitutional goals with appropriate rewards and penalties is needed in India, which has deep territorial inequity in the provisioning of minimum public services. Although the last five UFCs have used the strategy largely to serve the ToRs given to them, the disgusting narrative is that none of their ToRs sought to reward constitutional goals nor did they act keeping these fundamentals in view.

Look at the ToR of FC-15, which mentioned nine items to be rewarded, one of which was to "control or lack of it in incurring expenditure on populist measures". The items and their rewards and penalties leave many things to be desired. FC-11, the first since the 73rd/74th constitutional amendments, asserted: "Our overall scheme of resource transfers is characterised by pro-

States' performance on development goals mandated by the Constitution must be rewarded or penalised. The 16th Finance Commission can draw lessons from Kerala on this

## CARROTS & STICKS IN THE FINANCE COMMISSION'S HAND

M A OOMMEN

Former Chairman, Fourth State Finance Commission, Kerala, and Distinguished Fellow, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram



MANDAR PARDIKAR

viding a structure of incentives designed to reward fiscal prudence."

This pattern of 'incentivising and disincentivising' was continued in the recommendations of the 12th, 14th and 15th commissions. FC-13, which gave performance-based grants for reduction in infant mortality rate, improvement in the delivery of justice, etc. besides strongly promoting decentralisation reforms, stands out differently. Many UFCs seem to believe that the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act is a magic bullet to discipline states while the Union can pursue off-budget borrowings with impunity. To be sure, 'fiscal discipline' is more than expenditure pruning and is only a part of governance policy, particularly to facilitate the achievement

of constitutionally mandated goals or goals of national consequence like population policy and eradication of poverty.

The lack of an appropriate reward and punishment approach can adversely affect the fiscal prospects of a state, like Kerala, which achieved close to 100 percent literacy rate and has world-class records in other HDI components, topped millennium development goals, SDGs, rural-urban equity, a well-functioning public distribution system, enviable performance in decentralisation, and on female-male ratio compared to any European nation. As far back as 1987, I recall writing that the state will land in fiscal crises unless supported by maintenance grants.

Instructively, the Centre transferred

## THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS ONE ELECTION PLAN RAISES

LET'S consider some of the logistical challenges that need to be overcome to hold simultaneous polls—the hugely consequential proposal accepted by the Union cabinet earlier this month. It would involve elections to 545 seats of the Lok Sabha, and 4,123 assembly seats of 28 states and nine Union territories. If you consider it as something way beyond a smooth undertaking, add to it some 31-lakh-odd panchayat seats, tens of thousands of seats for the 4,852 urban local bodies, and you know the size of the task at hand.

The 'One Nation, One Election' report is in its present form an impractical one and may harm federalism in the future in favour of a strong Centre. The implications are so big that, however reluctant it may be, the ruling alliance at the Centre will have to open channels for consultation with opposition parties to arrive at a consensus. Only then can this provision be passed by both Houses of parliament.

There are many other issues that the Rammath Kovind-led committee, which submitted its report on the simultaneous elections earlier this year, raises. One is the fall of the Union government in the event of a no-confidence motion. Elections will be held and the government will be in office only till the remainder of the term even if the ruling party has won a majority. Is this a feasible idea? What will be the enormous cost that will be accruing?

A major worry, although the opposition parties have not gone ballistic on this, is the impact on federalism. Simultaneous elections will result in the domination of national issues at the cost of local issues. Even if attempts are made to highlight local issues, they would get drowned in the cacophony of national topics. This may also put national parties at an advantage at the cost of regional ones.

The Kovind report has favoured a presidential notification that will contain an 'appointed date' for the simultaneous polls to start. This is likely to be 2029. While the present Lok Sabha will complete its five year term by then, all state assemblies will need to be dissolved.

Now, the Constitution says the people's mandate will be for five years unless the government falls through a no-confidence motion and the assembly gets dissolved. There will be 10 states including Karnataka, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan that will complete five years in

2028. They will have to face people again within a year. As many as 17 states will have to go to polls within two, three or four years of their formation. They include Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala etc. If the objective of the whole Kovind exercise is mainly focused on containing expenditure, how does this help?



The nation deserves several answers before launching into an exercise as massive and consequential as simultaneous polls. For example, the Kovind Committee's report says the Election Commission has assured it can pull off this gargantuan exercise—but there is little clarity on logistical details or the costs

Another point: should monetary and logistical benefits that the report stresses override the federal structure and democratic ethos of the Indian constitution? There is an argument that frequent elections will help voters to regularly express their views on different issues. Their opinions are a reflection on how the government performed during its term. Synchronised polls will thwart this. Will the new proposal lead to reluctance on the part of opposition parties to move a no-confidence motion against the government?

There is no clarity on the number of amendments required. The Kovind committee says 18 amendments, including

15 constitutional ones, would be required to synchronise polls. However, it remains to be seen if the Centre reduces the number of constitutional amendments given the complexity in getting them passed. While simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies require parliamentary approval, holding local body polls within 100 days of the synchronised elections require consent from half of the state assemblies.

While the Lok Sabha and assembly polls will be the responsibility of the Election Commission of India, that of local bodies will be in the care of state election commissions. It would be another challenge for the NDA government to hammer out consensus in a fractured Lok Sabha.

Ensuring sufficient numbers of electronic voting machines would be a mammoth task. The committee says the ECI has assured that it can indeed hold simultaneous polls although there is no clarity on the number of electronic voting machines and polling booths required, the numbers of personnel needed, the kind of training required, the security forces required and their transfer from one place to another—all point to the enormous task lying ahead. Is India really up to it?

It would be interesting to see, if the proposal indeed gets the green signal, the number of phases the ECI would take to hold simultaneous polls. The latest effort needed seven phases to hold polls for the Lok Sabha and four state assemblies. Also, the ECI could not hold polls to even four states together in September-October 2024. It decided to conduct elections separately to Jammu & Kashmir and Haryana first, and Maharashtra and Jharkhand later.

Without getting into the merits of the Kovind committee report, it may be pointed out that the panel did not have wide representation in terms of regions. There was no nominee from southern, western or northeastern India, nor any woman on the team. This was much like the 15th Finance Commission, which had only male experts from the corridors of power in Delhi.

(Views are personal)

as a percentage of revenue expenditure, 32.6 percent in 1982-83. It stands at 21.8 percent in 2023-24, with a negative CAGR of 1 percent from 1983 to 2024. Indeed, FC-16 has to revisit the intergovernmental transfer system changing its inter-se devolution criteria. A recent paper by D Narayana of the M S Ramaiah University of Applied Sciences shows how almost all the devolution criteria, particularly income distance and environment conservation, are flawed in ensuring a fair distribution of resources to the states.

The shining social statistics of Kerala is in disturbing contrast to the steady fall in the divisible pool share from 3.95 percent by FC-7 to 1.92 percent by FC-15, with a negative compounded rate of 4.9 percent. The most disquieting episode is the story of Kerala's demographic transition from a demographic danger spot in the 1960s with a total fertility rate (TFR) per woman at 3.4, to the replacement rate reached in 1988 and stabilising around a TFR of 1.7-1.9.

The adverse impact is that Kerala lost its demographic dividend as far back as 2001, when its Index of Development Benefit reached its peak inflexion point of 40.8, and declined to 10.2 in 2021. It is projected to take a value of (-)1.2 in 2041, well-illustrated by the former World Bank demographer K C Zachariah in his book *Changing Kerala*.

Pathanamthitta and Idukki districts have already recorded negative population growth during 2001-2011. With increasing elderly population and dramatic changes in disease pattern and morbidity, with longevity demanding new healthcare along with the highest out-of-pocket expenditure in the nation, while the state is losing its tax potential, it is not an optimistic spectacle.

It is important for the 16th commission to know that over the last three decades, Kerala has been the job market for about 3.1 million migrants from West Bengal, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states. As State Planning Board member K Ravi Raman and others have shown, the migrants' need for healthcare, education of their children, and measures to counter security hazards take a heavy toll on the state.

Kerala needs to be rewarded for the huge money outflow per year. Performance must be rewarded. It is in this context that the plea for a fresh look on the theory and practice of rewards and penalties to intergovernmental transfer arrangements require to be revisited.

(Views are personal)

### MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Greeting Dissanayake

Ref: Patient dealing with Lanka called for as country turns left (Sep 24). India was quick to greet the new Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. Narendra Modi was timely in conveying felicitations. The new government's propensity for warmth with China need not put India on the back foot. **K R Venkata Narasimhan, Madurai**

#### Countering China

A resilient and emerging leadership begins with the maintenance of balance of power in the immediate neighbourhood. With Bangladesh and the Maldives cold-shouldering India, Sri Lanka would be an important destination to counter China's hegemony in the Indian Ocean region. **Sachidananda Satpathy, Sambalpur**

#### Chess motivation

Ref: Indian chess's golden generation gets going (Sep 24). The triumph of Indian men and women in the chess Olympiad is an outstanding accomplishment. It displays the youth's mental acuity, intelligence and ability to develop strategies. More children will be motivated as a result of this great victory. **Naveen Madhu, Kozhikode**

#### J&K progress

Ref: Navigating the minefields of J&K elections (Sep 24). Conducting polls in Jammu & Kashmir is extremely difficult due to ongoing security concerns. The abrogation of Article 370 aimed to enhance integration and development. But for real progress, an elected government must take charge to bridge the gap between central policies and the region's unique challenges. **Narayanan Kizhumundayur, Thrissur**

#### Permanent seat

Ref: Modi's message of humanity in Summit of Future (Sep 24). PM Modi has rightly raised his voice for India's permanent seat in the UN Security Council. India is the largest democracy in the world and has played a great role in many peace missions. If we had a permanent seat, there is a chance the Russia-Ukraine war might have been subdued by now. **T Kaish Ditya, Hyderabad**

#### Sex education

Ref: Sex education must to cut down crime, says SC (Sep 24). The Supreme Court's recent decision advocating for comprehensive sex education is a significant move towards reducing crime, particularly in combating child sexual exploitative and abuse material. By introducing sex education in schools and colleges, students will gain essential knowledge about consent, healthy relationships and the legal ramifications of sexual offenses. **Aman Giri, Bhubaneswar**

# Conflicts Bad for Biz, Bad Eco Hurts Peace

Empower multilateral agencies to broker peace

In an interview with ET, Jamie Dimon, arguably the most influential banker around, has repeated his concern that conflict today poses the biggest risk to the global economy. The JPMorgan chairman sees it as a bigger vulnerability than a lopsided recovery from the pandemic and policy correctives being imposed to set things right. Dimon has a point. Globally, conflict is spread over a bigger geographical canvas than it has been over 75 years. This has been a period when economic inequality among nations has subsided, but inequality within countries has intensified, taking the world back to levels witnessed towards the end of imperialism. Conflict is higher in regions where income and wealth inequality are more pronounced.

The nature of conflict has changed as well. Non-state elements are driving violent wealth redistribution, which makes it more challenging for any league of nations to offer resolution. Where the conflict is between nations, solutions are harder to come by in a strategically fractured world order. States, on their part, are re-examining their toolkits and equitable growth, a key to fairness in economic development, which figures high up in their list. New understanding over gender and climate inequity is shaping policy to resolve claims over resources. But results are slow and uneven. Institutional capacity needs to come up on a much bigger scale for emerging economies to put their development trajectories on a more balanced course. Development models are not about economies attaining top speed, but must come with clash protection.

Self-preservation requires economics to offer their share of solutions to avoid conflict. Tech tends to aggravate inequality, and its dispersal rate must be improved. Costs of using resources should be priced in sustainability. Unfortunately, consensus on both issues eludes the global community. That doesn't mean we should stop trying. The world needs to empower the multilateral agencies tasked with bringing negotiators to the table instead of leaving them on either side of a barbed wire.

That we have to weigh in on a 'secularism debate' in 2024 is tiresome — but necessary. The latest quibble about it comes from Tamil Nadu governor RN Ravi. This is not some voice from the fringe but a central government representative. Ravi is right to trace secularism, as articulated in the French constitutional principle of 'laïcité', of separation of state and religion in 19th-century Europe. He is wrong — and, ironically, Eurocentric — to think that it's the only form secularism can take. Secularism, with Indian characteristics, predates the separation of church and state in Europe in that it has been practised and preached in India as equality of all citizens regardless of faith before the law, later incorporated in the Constitution. Just because the 42nd constitutional amendment, identifying India as 'secular', was brought about by an autocratic regime in 1976, doth not make secularism a dodgy idea.

# Secularism, the Best Thing Since Hot Roti

True, 'secularism' has been misused by political players indulging in the Orwellian line, 'All religions are equal, but some religions are more equal than others.' But 'pseudo-secularism' cannot be conflated with secularism the same way pretence isn't honesty. Secularism is the lodestone of multi-religious, multicultural India. Government officials shouldn't be involved in the administration of Hindu temples or the Waqf Board have a free run. Administrations can't be seen as being soft on cow vigilantes or be perceived as overlooking an attack on a person wearing the sacred thread.

The concept of sarva dharma samanwaya is the way we practise, protect and proliferate our secularism. Neither should take away the need of the state to have dharma — a strong ethical and moral code that Ravi referred to in false opposition to secularism.

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On Sep 3, Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) granted the Acceptance of Necessity for acquisition proposals worth ₹1.45 lakh cr, with 99% allocated for procurement from indigenous sources under the Buy (Indian) and Buy (Indian-Indigenously Designed, Developed and Manufactured) categories. This move marks the latest in India's military modernisation efforts in alignment with its Aatmanirbhar Bharat campaign, reflecting a shift away from direct foreign purchases.

# Naatak, Nautanki, And an Empty Chair

Politics is all about power. Well, and a bit of statutory good life, but mainly about power. And what's power without naatak and nautanki? In the last two days, two politicians have left the citizenry scratching their heads like they just lost a game of charades. First up, we had NCP-SP chief Sharad Pawar, who, after what looked like a Bollywood-level fallout, is now reportedly spending 'quality time' at home with his estranged-turned-unestranged nephew Ajit Pawar. Yes, the one leading the 'rival party'.

But the real showstopper has been Delhi CM Atishi Marlena, who left a 'symbolic' brown leather chair empty beside her own smaller creamish one, claiming, 'This seat belongs to AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal.' Yes, kissa toh kursi ka hi hota hai. Got that. Atishi then went all Ramlila on us, declaring she felt the same 'pain' as Bharat when Ram was exiled for 14 years. In her rendition of viksit Bharat, she vowed to govern Delhi for, no, not the next 14 years — modern electoral cycles, never mind inner-party selections, don't allow that kind of humble luxury — but the next 'four months' as proxy for Lord AKJi. She also mentioned something about Ram's khadaun (wooden slippers). But this being an age more suitable for Crocs, most people missed that bit. Behind her, the portraits of BR Ambedkar and Bhagat Singh looked on nonplussed.

**SWAMISPEAK** India's port revolution has been remarkable, but it's well behind China

# Getting Into a Porting Spirit



**Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar**

As a journalist in Mumbai in 1988, I could see from my office window a long line of ships waiting to get into Mumbai port. The waiting time could be a shocking 28 days. The idling of the ships was matched — indeed, caused — by idling port workers backed by powerful trade unions.

A 1990 study by World Bank expert Hans Jürgen Peters found that the fastest way to unload a ship in Mumbai was to pay the unionised workers to stay at home, and hire private workers to do the job. What a travesty.

India's ports, among the best in developing countries during the British Raj, were ruined after Independence by stupid socialist policies. All major ports were reserved for a grossly inefficient public sector. Port unions were treated with kid gloves for fear of strikes.

So, let us cheer the recent World Bank report revealing that in 2023, no less than nine Indian container ports were among the top 100. Visakhapatnam, mainly a handler of bulk commodities, has a modest container section. This improved its efficiency so dramatically that it moved from 117th position in 2022 to 19th position in the world in 2023, becoming India's best. Next came Mundra port in Gujarat, long the Indian leader. Mundra climbed from 47th position in 2022 to 28th in 2023. Then came Pipavav in Gujarat (41st), Kamarajar in Chennai (47th), Cochin (63rd), Hazira near Surat (68th), Krishnapatnam in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh



Turning into a veritable role model

(71st), Chennai (80th), and Jawaharlal Nehru Port, Navi Mumbai (96th).

In 2023, Visakhapatnam achieved 27.5 moves (loadings and unloadings) per crane-hour. This facilitated a turnaround time of 21.4 hrs for ships. Yes, just 21 hrs as opposed to waiting for 28 days in 1988. Rarely has such a transformation occurred with so little fanfare. The law says all major ports must be government-owned, but leaves minor ports to the jurisdiction of state governments. However, there was no definition of 'minor ports' or restriction on their size.

Chimanbhai Patel, Gujarat's Congress chief minister in 1990-94, realised that the 'minor port' loophole could be used to create new ports bigger than GoI's 'major ports'. He propounded 'port-led development' for Gujarat, incubating new ports as industrial and transport hubs. Succeeding CMs, including Narendra Modi, followed the same path.

Gujarat moved towards private participation in ports in stages. First, it leased government jetties to private operators, then moved to joint ownership of entire ports, and finally to purely private ports. Gautam Adani's Mundra became India's biggest port on many metrics. The impetuous Indian Railways had no funds to connect new ports like Mundra to the main rail network. Always innovative, Adani and the Gujarat government formed a joint rail company for the task.

Other states followed Gujarat's example. 'Minor ports' sprouted in all coastal states. GoI eventually became a convert too. All major ports have shifted to the landlord-tenant model. The government is port landlord, handling customs and other administrative tasks, and leases out the operation of all jetties, mostly on the basis of international competitive bidding.

Today, many Indian jetties are run by global giants like Dubai World, Ma-

ersk and Port of Singapore Authority. Dozens of Indian companies have also joined the fray. Intense competition has now created world-class ports.

This year's Economic Survey lays out in some detail the improvement in Indian port performance. India's rank in the World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (LPI) improved from 44th in 2018 to 38th in 2023. With the introduction of cargo tracking, total dwell time of cargo in Visakhapatnam fell from 32.4 days in 2015 to 5.3 days in 2019.

Also, India's position in international shipments climbed from 44th in 2018 to 22nd in 2023. The median turnaround time for Indian ports has fallen to 0.9 days, better than in the US (1.5 days), Australia (1.7 days), or even former champion Singapore (1 day).

But while cheering India's port revolution, wake up to the great, growing gap with China. No longer are American, European or Japanese ports the biggest and best. China's port developments in the Yangtze delta off Shanghai and the Pearl River Delta from Shenzhen to Macau put to shame the rest of the world.

Entire coastlines and island clusters have been converted into a gigantic complex of jetties, connected to the mainland by bridges and tunnels up to 100 km long. This is a mind-boggling testimony to China's engineering skills.

Ningbo-Zhoushan Port on the Yangtze delta has been the biggest in the world for the last 14 years in total cargo throughput, which reached 1.25 bn tonnes last year. This is not a port in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, it consists of no less than 19 ports over a coastline of 220 km, including several islands.

The world's best container port, says the World Bank, is Yangshan. This is built on a chain of islands 30 km from Shanghai. It handles more cargo than all US container berths put together, a vivid demonstration of how the balance of world economic power is shifting. India has a tough job to catch up.



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Ego-Centred Behaviours

- An urge to judge.
- A desire to be right.
- Fear of the unknown.
- Attachment to an identity.
- Attachment to objects or people.
- Feeling insecure when attacked.
- Feelings of superiority or inferiority.
- Tendency to never let go or surrender.

The ego is not your enemy; it's your teacher. The more you observe the teacher, the more you learn. If you try to destroy your ego, you'll end up with more of it. Because the destroyer is also the ego. The only way out of this is awareness. As the ego becomes aware of itself, it ends the behaviours that cause it suffering.

# Chat Room

# Shiny Software Meets Hardware

Apropos 'Getting the Hardware at Delaware' by Seema Sirohi (Sep 24), the Quad summit is, in fact, inclusive of software in the sense that so much mutual understanding of the four leaders seems to have taken place. They look like-minded. PM Narendra Modi drew his stance from his recent visits to Russia, Ukraine and now the US, plus support from the diaspora. Quad's focus to continue with freedom of seaways, US gesture for semiconductor fabrication plant, drawing focus on Indian startups for innovative tech competence, US defence establishment's sharing approach and, more importantly, sensitising the bureaucracies should mellow down the geopolitics getting tangential. On the whole, Quad is becoming a sturdy forum for dealing with key issues that have a major impact on world affairs.

KUMADA  
Mumbai

# Short-Changed Over Overs

This refers to the news report, 'It's Ashwin' (ET Sport, Sep 23). In the first India-vs-Bangladesh Test, Bangladesh bowled 10 overs short on the first day. Apart from whatever penalties are

prescribed under the rules, the batting team must also be compensated. Calculate the average runs per over scored, multiply it by the number of short overs and add it to the score. Thus, the short overs may also have an impact on the result due to the bonus runs added.

TR RAMASWAMI  
Mumbai

# Deconstruct a Jugaad Nation

Recently returned to London after a brief holiday in Gujarat. My experience of the flooding in Baroda and other parts of Gujarat and other states has left indelible emotions of weariness and sadness. It seems virtually impossible that Baroda and other Indian cities will emerge as green cities with adequate drainage facilities and infrastructure. Within the realms of the power holders and civic discipline that buildings are haphazardly sprouting on every available plot or sq ft of land, our cities face a dead end. Without any planning, permission or controls sans roads and drains, our cities are doomed to be flooded and the misery it causes.

Given climate change, it is a frustrating situation, with poor infrastructure, dilapidated buildings surrounded by myriads of hanging cables, and poorly constructed roads. It shows the bleak life of an ordinary Indian citizen. Contrast this with ET reporting a range of high-profile initiatives and ventures, of the thrills of trails and more. Will this economy ever trickle to the masses, with the underlying corruption and lawlessness?

ARCHANA NEHRA  
London

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

# ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In a land where laddoos are discreet,  
Still no one cares what's in the treat.  
With ghee, sugar and spice,  
They taste oh-so-nice,  
Ingredients? Just eat, bhai, and repeat!

# Carbon Emissions

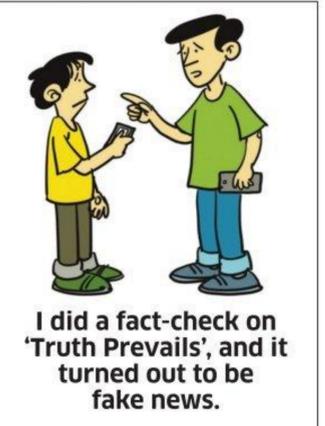
Greenhouse gas emissions from energy use, industrial processes, flaring and methane (in carbon dioxide equivalent terms) increased 2.1% to exceed the record level set in 2022. For the first time ever, energy-related emissions exceeded the 40 GtCO<sub>2</sub>e level, with emissions from the direct use of energy breaching 35 GtCO<sub>2</sub>e for the first time. The tables below list top 10 emitters and emissions by region in 2023...

Carbon dioxide equivalent emissions from energy, process emissions, methane and flaring (MT CO<sub>2</sub>e) in 2023

| Top 10 countries | By region                |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| China 12,604     | Asia Pacific 21,058      |
| U.S. 5,130       | North America 6,289      |
| India 3,122      | Europe 3,776             |
| Russia 2,176     | CIS 3,008                |
| Japan 1,039      | West Asia 2,900          |
| Iran 937         | Africa 1,768             |
| Indonesia 862    | S. & Cent. America 1,599 |
| S Arabia 726     | <b>WORLD 40,418</b>      |
| Canada 599       |                          |
| S Korea 594      |                          |

Note: The emissions above are the sum of carbon dioxide emissions from energy, carbon dioxide emissions from flaring, methane emissions (in carbon dioxide equivalent) associated with the production, transportation and distribution of fossil fuels, and carbon dioxide emissions from industrial processes. Source: Visual Capitalist

# Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



I did a fact-check on 'Truth Prevails', and it turned out to be fake news.

# Going It Alone Together



**Pushan Das & Gopal Nadadur**

New Delhi could continue reforming India's Defence Acquisition Procedure (DAP). The defence ministry could adopt strategies to address tech advancements, procurement processes, logistics support, industrial relationships and international collaboration related to capability development. A recent US-India Business Council-The Asia Group paper proposes the following key priorities:

- ▶ **Map requirement** Establish a more integrated defence planning dialogue with the industry that periodically identifies capability gaps and opportunities, including in specific platforms, subsystems and even components, providing predictability for military needs and business planning.
- ▶ **Push R&D** Introduce incentives and capital subsidies for R&D and manufacturing, and allocate funds for competitive prototyping to reduce risk.
- ▶ **Simplify processes** Streamline procurement categories in DAP to reduce complexity, coupled with graded incentives for indigenous design and content.
- ▶ **Enhance competition** Review nomination of orders to DPSUs to enhance global competitiveness, including for India's private defence industry.

Among India's numerous defence relationships, the bilateral with the US and mini-lateral with Quad partners, have grown highly significant, rooted in shared concerns over China's aggression. Facilitating quicker growth of industrial linkages with the US and other like-minded countries can help address India's defence procurement challenges, reduce risk, and promote knowledge transfer and skill development.

Announced during Narendra Modi's 2023 state visit to the US, the India-US Defence Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) offers a promising approach that addresses immediate and long-term needs. Supported by the new defen-

ice industrial roadmap framework, INDUS-X is fostering partnerships between Indian startups and US prime contractors. These collaborations can leverage the expertise of established firms to deliver capabilities quickly, enhancing both countries' defence technological prowess in balancing China in the Indo-Pacific.

▶ **JVs, please** Identify critical defence and strategic capabilities and incentivise JVs in these areas, which will enable domestic participants to develop core competencies with high-priority systems and capacities. Maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) capacities stand out as a key priority area that can leverage bilateral and multilateral partnerships. Exploring market carveouts with like-minded countries for platform-specific MRO capacities would help to create the necessary economies of scale, enabling industry to align its investment decisions.

▶ **New markets** Defence ministry must lead initiatives to catalyse third-country exports, particularly in large EMs in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Some measures could involve a well-defined export policy and reformed export controls, bilateral lines of credit to build third-country defence capacity, and easier access to export financing.

India's defence sector is poised to capitalise on initiatives like SOSA, INDUS-X and a potential Reciprocal Defence Procurement Agreement. The defence ministry could enable the sector's lift-off through further reforms to its extant acquisition procedures and integrating lessons learnt from past programmes, the experiences of other ministries and global examples, and otherwise. The domestic and geopolitical circumstances for urgent reform and growth are strong, rare and fleeting.

Das is director, aerospace and defence, US-India Business Council, and Nadadur is VP South Asia, The Asia Group

Follow the Silk Road

If you're in London between Sep 23 and Feb 23, 2025, there's a treat waiting at the British Museum: an exhibition on Silk Roads. And if that piques your interest, you have to listen to a 2016 Getty podcast, Peter Frankopan on the Silk Roads.

In an almost hour-long podcast, Jim Cuno, former president of J Paul Getty Trust, speaks to the author of 'The Silk Roads: A New History of the World on this grand network that was a conduit for the dissemination of religious and scientific ideas, the exchange of commercial and cultural goods, and advance of military might and political ambitions.

Frankopan underscores that while Europe wasn't the centre of the world, its empires grew through global trade. The pattern for most European nations was the same: they established fortified warehouses for trade, which morphed into colonies with armed defence. This, in turn, entangled them in local conflicts and then global rivalries.

Discovery of oil in the 20th c. intensified imperial interests, shaping geopolitics as nations competed to control this resource. You can call this gem of a podcast an intro to what we now call globalisation.

# PEAS IN A PODCAST

# Follow the Silk Road

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With a little help from our friends



## CONTRAPUNTO

The object of war is not to die for your country  
but to make the other bastard die for his

— GEORGE S PATTON

## Bibi's Calculations

Hezbollah baited Israel for months. But Netanyahu's politics may still lead to a larger regional conflict

Monday's deadly airstrikes by Israel in southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah's retaliation by firing more than 200 rockets into northern Israel, mark a huge escalation in the 11-month-old conflict. There's little doubt now this is open war: 492 people were killed and another 1,645 were injured in the Israeli barrage, the highest single-day death toll for Lebanon since its 1975-1990 civil war. But blame also lies with Hezbollah, which has been baiting Israel for months with Beirut doing little to rein in the militant group.

**Hezbollah asked for it** | The militant group's calculation was that it could continue low-level strikes against Israel in solidarity with Hamas in Gaza. This would stretch Tel Aviv's military resources and impact its economy. Hezbollah also bet that Israel would be wary of opening up a two-front war. But with tens of thousands of Israelis unable to return to their homes along the northern border, and Netanyahu possibly looking for ways to reduce Gaza attacks, Hezbollah's daily rocket attacks were no longer palatable for Tel Aviv.

**Game changer** | Hezbollah thought it could absorb whatever Israel threw at it. But the pager and walkie-talkie bombings last week hit the group hard. True, Mossad's modus operandi has raised worldwide concerns about weaponising everyday electronic devices. And Israel is earning itself international opprobrium by escalating another conflict on the Lebanese front. But at this point, Netanyahu just doesn't care. And US in election mode is unable to rein him in.

**World's Bibi problem** | Of course, Netanyahu's desire for political survival is playing a part in all of this. But he's made a clever calculation with Hezbollah. Arab nations — who were troubled by Israel's Gaza operation — will not mind the offensive against the Shia militant group. Plus, if Iran steps in at some point, it's a jackpot for Netanyahu as even a future US administration will be forced to stand with him. Iran's moderate President Peshkian has already said that Israel is laying traps to drag his country into war. Miscalculations can be catastrophic. The world, not just West Asia, has a Netanyahu problem.



## Jaago, Sarkar, Jaago

Consumer protection ecosystem in this country can take a leaf out of the Australia playbook

Australia's competition regulator has sued the country's two largest supermarket chains, Coles Group and Woolworths, because they misled shoppers. Imagine that. Both, the regulator said, inflated prices of lots of common items — as routine as Coca-Cola, Tim Tams biscuits and Colgate toothpaste for instance — before reducing them to MRP or slightly higher. But this playbook is all too familiar to shoppers in India. Inflated prices before discounts were in pre-internet times the SOP, till one could compare with, and snag a better bargain, at online grocers and supermarkets. It is unimaginable our govt would rush to protect the consumer at the grocers. Australian govt's aggressive consumer protection is quite the novelty.

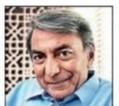
Consumer protection in India sadly remains a miserly set-up. After the initial burst of consumer awareness and much gusto in promising consumers 'protection' decades ago, the drive to build the required ecosystem petered out, an arduous trek, another govt layer with the same pervasive lethargy of most govt-public interfaces. The network, including consumer courts, waffles on cases and is tight-fisted in awarding compensations. It has watched the coaching industry fleece students for decades, but only just discovered the muscle to recognise them as a consumer class — its helpline has long stacked thousands of complaints against coaching centres. Take the right to defect-free goods. A buyer expects a glitch-free product. Manufacturers are loath to replace defective products, let alone refund. The law makes it incumbent on makers to replace or refund — but what buyers face is a tedious process that amounts to harassment. It was only yesterday that govt finally moved on forming "guidelines" for misleading ads claiming "nutrition", and started to think about buyers' right to information about repairability of electronic devices.

The successful tackle of surge pricing by cab aggregators is a shining example of what consumer protection ecosystem can deliver. The centralised complaints line received on average 1L complaints each month April to June this year. Overpricing, fleeing, poor after-sales service are almost a given for the Indian consumer — including at private schools and hospitals. Perhaps, it's way too ambitious to expect regulators to prioritise overpricing at the grocers.

## Bill of health

Thanks to a medical insurance scheme, we won't be able to afford to fall ill any more

Jug Suraiya



Supposedly, health is wealth. But in India ill health is wealth. The wealth of govt coffers, which benefit from unhealthiness. According to finance ministry data, during the last three years GOI earned ₹24,500cr through GST of 18% levied on health insurance. India has no universal healthcare scheme. So, many of those who can afford it, and not a few who can't afford it but are constrained by necessity to do so, have to resort to private medical insurance.

The older the insured, the higher the insurance premium, and the greater the tax amount. Ever since the GST regime was introduced — dramatically enough at midnight on July 1, 2017, evoking echoes of India's historic tryst with Independent destiny — a strong case has been made for lowering the tax on medical insurance, or scrapping it altogether.

In response, govt has announced that under its Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), it will provide free health cover of ₹5L to those above 70 years, irrespective of income. Reportedly, this will benefit almost 60mn, with an estimated price tag of ₹3,437cr.

Unlike private health insurance, govt health insurance doesn't invite GST, which would be like taking money out of one pocket and putting it into another.

So how is GOI to make up for the loss incurred by expanding its healthcare scheme? Possibly by raising GST on other goods and services, or bringing more items into the tax net.

This could include medicines. Currently insulin, a lifeline for diabetics, attracts 5% GST, as do quinine, essential in the battle against malaria, and oral rehydration kits, plus a wide range of antibiotics.

Ayurvedic, unani, and homeopathic medications fall in the 12% GST slab, while the purchase of hospital beds, operating tables, and other fitments invites GST at the rate of 18%.

Will these rates go up to offset the revenue loss resulting from the expansion of AB-PMJAY? Perhaps. But whatever the case, falling ill in India is no joke. Not even a sick one.



secondopinion

## GOI, Think Through ONOE

One nation one election is good for democracy. But it needs political give & take. Centre should shorten this Parliament's term. That will bring on board state govts whose terms will be curtailed

Arghya Sengupta



If elections are festivals of democracy, then like most festivals they too should happen at fixed times. The excitement of Diwali, Durga Puja, or Christmas lies in their certainty. They take place annually, on or around the same dates, the build-up to which usually is a joyous concoction of family gatherings, new clothes and good food.

The Cabinet resolution last week approving the proposal for 'One Nation One Election' (ONOE) — holding simultaneous elections for Union and all state govts once every five years — restores this festiveness, and, consequently, the significance of elections. Just like no one can be excited about a festival that comes around once every few weeks or months, excessively frequent elections are tiring for electors.

Implementing ONOE would pose logistical challenges no doubt. The estimated cost of the exercise in 2029 is ₹7,951cr. EC, in its submission to the Kovind panel, stressed the need for a "definite lead time" to manage the logistical demands, which include updating electoral rolls, procuring additional voting machines, and coordinating security forces.

**Higher turnouts** | But studies make one thing clear — when elections are simultaneous, voter turnout is higher. A research paper by Csaba Nikolenyi that studied 260 elections in India between 1971 and 2004 demonstrated that the turnout on average was 9.94% higher when elections to the Union and states were held together. This means an additional 6cr voters if such elections were held today. This additional turnout would be a massive boost for democracy.

Much of the scepticism about simultaneous elections is based on the view that it'll benefit BJP, the predominant political force at the Centre. Studies bear out the fact that voters are more likely to vote for the same party at the Centre and the state when elections are held together. But which party is that? In a research paper covering 2,900 regional elections in Europe by Schakel and Jeffrey, the authors show that voters only vote in favour of national parties in simultaneous elections when there are no strong regional parties.

The corollary to this inference is that in states where regional parties are strong, it provides an opportunity for them to compete nationally in a way they may not have been able to otherwise. Simply assuming that simultaneous elections will benefit BJP is either lazy commentary or political excuse-making.

**Federalism won't be hit** | Whichever way people ultimately vote, it is true that ONOE will be a marked change in

India's electoral landscape. This has led many to express the fear that it will upset the basic structure of Indian federalism. But this is not true empirically. It is not as if elections at different times promote federalism whereas a single election will impinge upon it.

It is also not a credible legal claim. The Constitution says nothing about when elections should be held. This is because of the fundamental belief of the framers that all elections would by default be held simultaneously, as they were till 1967. Out-of-turn elections were an exception. Today, when the exception has swallowed the rule, it is disingenuous to claim the Constitution sanctions the exception.

Regarding the proposal by the Kovind committee to shorten the term of any govt voted after a mid-term election to the remaining period of five years (rather than a fresh five years), there may be two views on its desirability. But what is good for the goose is good for the gander — since the same rule applies to Union and states, there is no question of Indian federalism being affected by it.

lism being affected by it.

**Need for statesmanship** | A valid criticism is on the logistics of implementation. The Kovind proposal states that exactly five years from the first sitting of the next Lok Sabha (currently scheduled for June-July 2029), all state legislatures and Parliament itself would stand dissolved. This is scheduled, as per current estimates, for June 2034. On that date, the legislatures of Karnataka and MP would have completed around 1 year, UP and Punjab 2 years, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu 3 years. This would represent a significant shortening of tenures of these elected govts. It is entirely legitimate for such states to berate the one-sidedness of the proposal.

What ONOE needs is not political partisanship but statesmanship. The Cabinet was right in approving ONOE in principle. But it needs to show statesmanship in implementing it. Instead of expecting only the states to take a hit, it should walk the talk and dissolve the current Lok Sabha in 2028, a year before its expected completion. This automatically means that the tenure of 10 state legislatures would not have to be significantly shortened, since they too in the normal course vote in 2028.

With Parliament making the first sacrifice, the remaining states would lose the moral high ground to claim the proposal discriminates against them. This give-and-take is likely to unlock the consensus necessary for ONOE to become a reality. Like in all good Indian festivals, GOI as the *karta*, must lead the way. Only then will the entire joint family of Indian democracy stop bickering and come out in their finery for the one festival that unites all Indians.

The writer is research director, Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. Views are personal



## LET'S NOT AGAIN UNMAKE IN INDIA

The Samsung workers' strike shows why India needs a framework to guarantee interruption-free manufacturing. That also helps workers

Ajay Srivastava



Over 1,000 workers at Samsung's Sripurumbudur factory in Tamil Nadu have been on strike since Sep 9 over demands for trade union recognition, better wages, and improved working conditions. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), affiliated with CPM, leads the strike.

The strike has halted 80% of the factory's production of TVs, refrigerators, and washing machines, affecting local sales and exports.

If swift action isn't taken, the unrest could spread to hundreds of other firms in the region, as CITU is also talking to firms such as Foxconn, Flex, and Samminia to recognise its union and agree to other terms.

**Making in India** | This strike comes at a crucial time when India is poised to triple its electronics sector turnover to \$500bn by 2030. Both Samsung and Sripurumbudur are an important part of India's electronics story.

Samsung has moved much of its production from China to Vietnam and India. The MNC contributes 30% or \$55.7bn to Vietnam's exports, and has ambitious plans to expand operations in India.

Sripurumbudur, 40km from Chennai, is a hot new industrial hub, with many SEZs and billions of dollars of investments. It houses global manufacturing giants such as Hyundai, BMW, Dell, Flextronics, Foxconn, Jabil, Lenovo, Mitsubishi, Nissan, Saint-Gobain, and Samsung.

**Breaking up in India** | Sripurumbudur also has a history of many labour unrests, with significant strikes at Hyundai (1999, 2007, 2011), Nokia (2014), Foxconn (2015, 2021), and Royal Enfield (2018).

Foreign competitors often gain from disruptions such as the Samsung strike. A similar situation led to Nokia's shutdown in 2014, causing India to lose its competitive edge in mobile manufacturing for over a decade. It is crucial to recall this event to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

**How we lost Nokia** | Nokia moved to Sripurumbudur with seven component suppliers in 2006-07 and soon became a symbol of success in mobile phone manufacturing. Between 2010 and 2013, Nokia employed over

7,000 direct workers and 10,000 indirect workers and exported over \$2bn annually.

However, local political interference soon began, with demands for contracts and free phones. The situation escalated when the state sales tax department accused Nokia of evading ₹2,400cr in taxes by falsely reporting domestic sales as exports. State govt refused to accept Nokia's views, despite Nokia providing customs documents to prove the mobile phones were indeed exported. Madras HC provided relief only after a prolonged legal battle. New tax disputes and union pressures further crippled Nokia's operations, leading to the plant's eventual closure.

Nokia's collapse reduced India's mobile phone exports from \$2bn to just \$200mn the following year. Over 17,000 workers, 70% of them women, lost their



jobs. India's mobile phone imports from China surged. Nokia's downfall tarnished India's reputation as an investment destination, giving China the advantage.

**Fear of disruption** | The Samsung strike raises concerns about India's ability to provide a trouble-free, uninterrupted manufacturing environment. This is essential to attract investors and MNCs.

The strike has the potential to disrupt the regional manufacturing ecosystem. Prolonged unrest could motivate unions to push their agenda in other states.

The timing is particularly sensitive, as India is currently reviewing Free Trade Agreements with South Korea and Asean, aiming to boost investments. Labour

instability can discourage future foreign investment.

**Actions by govt** | TN govt should immediately bring together Samsung and other major manufacturers to negotiate and prevent the unrest from spreading.

It may involve unions in industry-wide discussions on wages, safety, and worker welfare without allowing unions to interfere with individual company operations. Tough, but required.

Samsung should create an internal worker representation committee to address wage concerns and other key issues for experienced workers. It should be more accommodative to genuine demands.

Centre should collaborate with states to proactively resolve labour disputes affecting large firms and prevent issues from escalating into large-scale strikes. The Centre can establish industrial intelligence units to monitor and address potential threats to industry to avoid a recurrence of Nokia and Samsung-like situations.

**Clarity for producers** | Most important, GOI needs to establish a clear legal framework that defines manufacturers' obligations, including compliance with labour laws, ESG standards, and worker welfare. If companies like Samsung comply with these requirements, the state should act quickly to protect them from disruptions.

This law should define rules regarding trade unions' involvement or their representation on management boards to ensure transparency and predictability for investors.

**What did China do** | The unrest at Samsung is a critical reminder for both state govts and the Centre. While we invest in expanding manufacturing, it is time to pay attention to safeguarding existing operations. Companies that have committed billions to India's manufacturing sector must be protected.

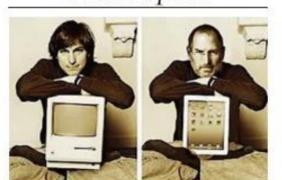
Achieving bipartisan support from all political parties — remember CITU is affiliated with CPM — is crucial to strengthen and secure India's manufacturing sector. We don't need to follow China's rulebook on manufacturing and workers' rights, but a look at it will help in making our own rules.

The writer heads a research group focused on trade, technology and climate change

## Calvin &amp; Hobbes



## Sacredspace



If you define the problem correctly, you almost have the solution.

Steve Jobs

## How To Live Ordinary Lives In Extraordinary Ways

Jaya Row

The world is a wonderful place to live in. Technology has made it even more alluring. But behind the facade of fabulous lifestyles and high-end cars are loneliness, depression and sorrow. Even those who have reached the pinnacle of success suffer from anxiety, failed relationships and mental health issues.

The Bhagwad Gita provides a technique for life that enables us to live ordinary lives in an extraordinary way. The single most important determinant of success, happiness, and growth is the intellect. The mind is a flow of thought, the domain of emotions, feelings, and impulses. The intellect has the ability to discern, discriminate between pairs of opposites, and decide. A well-fortified intellect stands apart from emotions, from the likes and dislikes of the mind, and thinks clearly.

Look within. Shift your gaze from the world to yourself. When you look at yourself objectively, you see the demons within. You begin to change the way you think, feel, and act, and the results are magical.

You think happiness lies out there in the world, in the malls of the world. If happiness were truly in the world, the same object should give the same quantum of happiness to all. This does not happen. Are we barking up the wrong tree?

We seek instant gratification. Swipe, and you get what you want in a jiffy. But that which gives instant joy gives sorrow in the long run. Junk food is delicious. However, too much of it leads to ill health. It may feel good to be nasty to people, but it makes for a lonely life later. In the rush for instant pleasure, we sign up for a life of unhappiness.

This does not mean you live a life of pain and self-denial. Enjoy instant pleasure, but also invest in your long-term happiness. Wake up early and exercise most days, but sleep in late once in a while.

We all want success in life. We do not realise that perfection lies within.

Why are you working? If it is only for personal profit and pleasure, you become mediocre. Motivated by a higher ideal you become amazingly successful. Don Bradman did not play cricket for money. Ustad Bismillah Khan played the shehnai for the love of it.

The Bhagwad Gita says, "Work in a spirit of yajna, service, and sacrifice for a higher ideal. Go beyond petty, self-serving interests and dedicate your actions to your company, community, or country. Your mind remains calm, your

intellect is sharp, and your actions brilliant. You achieve outstanding success. All unselfish people are happy. And they evolve spiritually, too."

Expand your circle of love, and you feel connected. Feel one with people, and life becomes extraordinary. Your loved ones go well beyond the routine to do things for you. You experience the incredible result of collective, cooperative effort. The larger your circle of love, the greater the happiness.

Lastly, understand that everything in the world is impermanent. Search for the permanent, that which always remains with you. The wise do not bother with the passing, ephemeral joys of life. Seek the eternal and attain it. Then you become truly extraordinary.

Jaya Row will give talks on the Bhagwad Gita from Sep 26 to 29, 6.30-8pm at Kamani Auditorium, Delhi. For details WhatsApp 9820138429



THE SPEAKING TREE

## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Fighting child porn

SC sends out zero-tolerance message

**C**ORRECTING an 'egregious error' made by the Madras High Court, the Supreme Court has ruled that downloading and watching sexually explicit content involving children are offences under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act and the Information Technology Act. This implies that even viewing child pornographic material — without storing or sharing it — is tantamount to its possession. The landmark judgment is expected to go a long way in curbing the all-pervasive menace of sexual exploitation of children.

Kids are vulnerable to being targeted by predators everywhere — at home, on the school campus and in public places. Sexual abuse of minors is the elephant in the room, particularly in countries like India. Fearing ignominy, victims' families tend to sweep the sordid matter under the carpet. In many cases, close family members commit these despicable crimes behind a veil of secrecy. With UNICEF flagging the widespread use of digital technologies as a factor behind this menace, it is very important to safeguard kids and deter potential offenders with a robust legal mechanism. The POCSO Act does have some stringent provisions, but their diverse interpretations by high courts have proved to be a stumbling block.

Child pornography — the very term is on the way out as the Supreme Court has told courts not to use it in any judicial order or judgment and instead prefer 'child sexual exploitative and abuse material'. This sends out a strong message to society at large that such acts will be countered with a zero-tolerance approach. Sexual harassment in any form leaves the kids psychologically scarred for life. It adversely impacts not only their studies and relationships — their entire personality, in fact. It is hoped that the SC's intervention will motivate parents, educators and others to talk openly about sexual matters without a sense of stigma or shame. These stakeholders must also monitor the smartphone usage of children to ward off harmful influences.

## No, Governor

RN Ravi forgets his constitutional responsibility

**I**NDIVIDUALS holding constitutional posts are expected to hold themselves to a very high standard of behaviour. Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi has, time and again, chosen to disregard any such value system. He has made it a habit to stoke controversies. His run-ins with the DMK government have been distinctly marked by churlishness on his part. Now, he has ignited a political storm with his remarks that secularism is a European concept and has no place in India. The Opposition has termed the Governor's comment a violation of the Constitution, which establishes India as a secular state and separates religion from politics. Ravi, in his personal capacity, is entitled to maximalist views, however unpalatable these may be. He forgets — intentionally, it appears — that airing these publicly undermines the office he holds. It's a breach of his constitutional responsibility. It seems that he couldn't care less, which is highly problematic.

The politicisation of the gubernatorial office is one Congress inheritance that the BJP has chosen to not only persist with but also indulgently play around with. Several Governors have come to, or have been made to, believe that their primary role is to be loggerheads with elected governments. In their overzealousness, some have chosen to unveil their ideological makeup and political baggage. When they overstep the bounds of office, Governors give credence to the charge that they are agenda-driven. It's a disturbing pattern that is being replicated in state after state. The loss of credibility and trust in this vital component of the federal structure can have grave repercussions for the Centre-state relations.

Any attempt to weaken the country's secular fabric needs to be confronted with full force. It's perplexing that an urgent need is being felt to show the rule book to those entrusted with upholding it. So be it.

## ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 1974

## Third World woes

IN the reports of the Reserve Bank of India and the World Bank, hardly any silver lining is discernible. In different tones, they give sufficient hints that we are all heading for harder times. The only consolation may be that we are not alone in this drift towards economic disaster. Amidst the galloping inflation comes the threat of a recession. Henry Kissinger has already raised an alarm. He told the UN Assembly: "World economic strains threaten to engulf us all in a general depression." This is especially depressing to the poor and developing countries, which are already in a bad way. The World Bank warns that most developing countries will stagnate or record very little growth between now and 1980. Stating how the year's events have jeopardised the economic development of the poorest countries, the report says that developing nations, except those which export petroleum and minerals, will not be able to achieve the 6 per cent growth rate in GNP, the target set for the second development decade. For that matter, even "moderately acceptable" growth rates cannot be achieved without a substantial increase in the flow of external resources to them. But then who is to provide these resources? Those developing countries which have no oil resources of their own will need at least \$2,600-million aid this year over and above the previous forecasts, if their economies are to grow at all. The World Bank is apparently counting on the goodwill of the international community. But any optimism in this regard has to be guarded. The developed nations have not gone much beyond paying lip service to the cause of the have-nots.

## The lure of 'maximum government'

There is a need to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of the districts created in the past few decades



**ASHOK LAVASA**  
FORMER ELECTION  
COMMISSIONER OF INDIA

**M**INIMUM government, maximum governance — it's an appealing and apt notion. The other popular notion is that the governance structure in India has only three powerful pillars: Prime Minister (PM), Chief Minister (CM) and the District Magistrate (DM), making PM-CM-DM the trinity that rules India.

I couldn't find the exact number of districts that existed in India at the time of Partition, but there were 402 at the time of the first post-Independence Census in 1951, and there were 27 states and three Union Territories (UTs). As per the latest count, there are 28 states and eight UTs and 806 districts. Five of them were added recently in Ladakh — the youngest UT, created in 2019 — taking the number of its districts from two to seven.

The Census-wise number of districts was: 1951 — 402; 1961 — 436; 1971 — 449; 1981 — 461; 1991 — 476; 2001 — 593; 2011 — 640. Seventy-four districts were added till 1991. The next decade (1991-2001) saw the addition of 117 districts; this number dropped to 47 in the decade between 2001 and 2011. The last 13 years have seen the creation of 166 districts.

In 1951, Andhra Pradesh (AP) had 19 districts and Hyderabad state had 17; today, AP has 26, while Telangana, which was carved out of AP, has 33. Similarly, the number has gone up from 13 to 35 in Assam, 18 to 38 in Bihar, one to 11 in Delhi, six to 12 in Himachal Pradesh, six to 20 in Jammu & Kashmir, 12 to 23 in Punjab, 13 to 30 in Odisha, 21 to 50 in Rajasthan, 40



**ADMINISTRATIVE PUSH:** The number of districts in Ladakh, India's youngest UT, has risen from two to seven. PTI

to 75 in Uttar Pradesh and from 15 to 30 in West Bengal.

The record of some of the new states created after the enactment of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, is revealing. Haryana has 22 districts, up from the seven in 1966, when it was created. Telangana's count has gone up from 10 to 33, Uttarakhand from nine to 13, Jharkhand from 18 to 24, and Chhattisgarh from 16 to 33.

The creation of a new district, essentially an administrative unit, doesn't seem to follow any rational principle. There are no defined geographical or demographic criteria for the creation of a district. Kutch, the largest district in India, has an area of 45,674 sq km and a population of 2,092,371. Mahe, the smallest district, has an area of 8.69 sq km and a population of 41,816. North 24 Parganas, the biggest district by population, has 10,009,781 people and an area of 4,094 sq km, while Dibang Valley, the smallest, has a population of 8,004 and an area of 9,129 sq km. The population of undivided Leh district is 133,487, with an area of 45,110 sq km, and Kargil's population is 140,802, with an area of 14,086 sq km. Now Drass and Zaskar have been created out of Kargil and Changthang, Nubra and Sham Valley out of Leh.

## The creation of a new district, essentially an administrative unit, doesn't seem to follow any rational principle.

Their geographical demarcation and population are not clear from the announcement of their birth.

It is true that the original Ladakh district was too huge to be administered. Kargil and Leh were culturally distinct, which made both regions unique. This led to the creation of Kargil as a separate district in 1979. The truncated Leh district continued to be the second largest district in the country geographically.

New districts in India generally are the outcome of a political demand rather than any objective criteria. For example, in the case of Ladakh, there were protests for the creation of a new Muslim-majority district of Sankoo out of Kargil, ostensibly as it remained cut off from Kargil during winters. Similar demands were made by the people of Zaskar for a new district

out of Kargil. The same could be said of Drass, Changthang, Khatlasi and Turtuk, all parts of Leh.

However, is the mere demand for granting the status of a district enough justification for creating a new administrative unit that imposes a financial burden on the exchequer? A new district entails additional manpower and the construction of new office and residential buildings. A new district is generally an upgrade from subdivision headquarters with the expectation that an attendant setup like a superintendent of police and other district-level offices would be established. That is often not the case as the other commensurate offices take a long time coming up. Sometimes, the upgradation of all departmental offices is neither needed nor possible due to budgetary constraints.

The key point is that a new district doesn't lead to any greater devolution of authority to the district head. Therefore, it is hard to understand how an official who couldn't effectively administer a larger area can be administratively more effective in a smaller area exercising the same powers. This was perhaps justified in times when physical distance contributed to delays, but in an era of technology-driven governance

with a vast functional communication network, it might be more useful to delegate authority, as was done in the far-flung snowbound districts when they became inaccessible, and to develop decision-making systems that do not depend on the physical presence of higher authorities at the local level.

I am not aware if it is possible to lay down objective parameters for the creation of new administrative units. I am not sure if we could even evolve the concept of a viable district. There is a need to carry out a cost-benefit analysis of the districts created in the past few decades. A new district would have certainly led to more construction and urbanisation, but has it improved the quality of governance and the environment? For example, it is a moot point whether Ladakh, which was earlier administered by a DC and had an empowered autonomous elected council, is better governed with the creation of the office of the lieutenant governor, a chief secretary, half a dozen secretaries, a similar high-ranking hierarchy in other departments, and whether all this would improve the quality of development taking place in the ecologically fragile region.

When my daughter was the DM of Leh a few years ago, she would often joke that the district she headed was bigger than the entire state of Haryana where I served. A five-hour drive in any direction from Leh city would still keep you in the same district, whereas a mere three-hour drive from the centre of Haryana would take you outside the state boundaries.

The craze for creating new administrative units reminds me of the time when we were under trainees in Haryana in 1981. One of us was in Hisar district that had Adampur village, which had been upgraded to a block headquarters because the then chief minister belonged to that place. The divisional commissioner of Hisar would jokingly tell my batchmate that he would retire as the divisional commissioner of Adampur division. Although that prophecy didn't come true, who knows how far the lure of 'maximum government' would go.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Mere good governance is not enough; it has to be pro-people and proactive. — Narendra Modi

## When colleagues bore brunt of lampooning

RAHUL BEDI

**M**Y journalistic career began accidentally in the mid-1970s at Mayo College, Ajmer, where, as a callow assistant master, I authored and covertly circulated subversive pamphlets satirising my colleagues.

Titillatingly dubbed *The Lampoon*, these single-spaced A4 cyclostyled leaflets parodying fellow masters (including the principal) elicited the desired reaction: peevish my colleagues but electrifying students. Anonymity was obviously observed, with no master being named but referred to by assorted appellations like Kaddu, Jinx, Rampu, Sampu and Piaro, given to them by students, but leaving little or no doubt as to their identities.

And as insurance against being identified as *The Lampoon's* progenitor, I mocked myself mercilessly in the guise of 'Thud', the moniker bestowed on me by students due to my ferocious exertions on the squash court. Of course, I was under suspicion as *The Lampoon's* architect, but Thud's inclusion in it somewhat allayed doubts. However, the unexpected *jac-cuse* eventually outing me was delivered by the sporting principal himself during the morning assembly session at the end of term several months later, in which he announced my (voluntary) departure from Mayo.

Op *Lampoon* was diabolically complex in its execution. Its impudent contents were laboriously hammered out on a portable Remington typewriter, allocated to me in my role as staff adviser to *Mayoor*, the monthly school journal. Thereafter, a stencil was prepared, equally arduously, and limited copies run off on the school's sole inky copying machine in a secluded alcove by the magnificently turbaned peon manning it. He innocently believed the incendiary stencils to be only sets of student test papers.

*The Lampoon's* distribution came next, demanding crafty and surreptitious handling. Some pamphlets were casually secreted by me into random masters' pigeonholes at the enchanting 19th-century Stowe staff club, to which all teachers repaired daily for their elevenses. But the bulk of the inflammatory handbills were scattered across plates in the senior dining hall, laid out for lunch. Now, I can safely reveal the connivance of Sham Singh, the towering and affable Rajput supremo of the dining hall, in this chicanery and his stoic silence subsequently over *l'affaire Lampoon*.

All hell broke loose once lunch began with *The Lampoon* as the only course. Whoops of delight rent the air as students feasted hungrily on the droll ridiculing in them of their teachers. Fellow masters were infuriated, barring a handful, who grudgingly tolerated the parody. But the air of high intrigue continued to imbue *The Lampoon's* four-odd editions, particularly since its contents appeared suddenly and seemingly from nowhere.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Uproot the scourge of farm fires

Apropos of 'Dousing farm fires', the annual scourge of stubble burning in Punjab and Haryana is upon us again. Penal measures, as seen in Punjab, seem more punitive than preventive. The menace of stubble burning persists because farmers, pressed for time, see no viable alternative to get rid of crop residue. While awareness is growing among farmers about the need to ditch the practice, it alone cannot extinguish these fires. Instead of relying on coercion, the state must offer practical, incentivised solutions, such as subsidised machinery, easier access to eco-friendly alternatives and robust support systems. Farmers are not the enemy; they are stakeholders in a shared crisis. Policies that address the root cause and offer tangible benefits will yield better results than reactive measures.

SEWA SINGH, AMRITSAR

## Sri Lanka has spoken

The people of Sri Lanka have spoken by electing Anura Kumara Dissanayake as their new President. With 42.3 per cent of the votes, Dissanayake's victory reflects the public's desire for change and economic recovery. His pledge to fight corruption and bolster the economy resonated with voters reeling from austerity measures linked to the IMF bailout. As Dissanayake takes the helm, he faces daunting tasks: reassuring markets, repaying debt and lifting millions out of poverty. His promises of anti-corruption measures and pro-poor policies boosted his popularity, despite concerns over tax slashes and debt rework. With Sri Lanka's economy expected to grow this year, Dissanayake must balance populist demands with fiscal prudence.

SARGUNPREET KAUR, MOHALI

## Protect children from predators

The Supreme Court's decision to criminalise the downloading of child pornography is a pivotal step in combating the sexual exploitation of minors. This ruling highlights the growing threat of the misuse of digital platforms. By treating the mere possession of such material an offence, the court has taken a bold step that would help bring down the demand for obscene content involving children and check the dissemination of such material. The decision will go a long way towards preventing crimes against

children and ensure that those who prey on them face strict consequences. Now, the focus should be on spreading public awareness about ways to protect kids from predators.

BHAKTI ARORA, MOHALI

## A blow to child pornography

The Supreme Court has done well to set aside the Madras HC verdict on child pornography. The apex court is right to declare consuming or downloading explicit content featuring children an offence under the POCSO Act and the Information Technology Act. Now more than ever before, there is a need to shield vulnerable minors from sexual exploitation. Besides, there is a need to educate the masses about this sensitive matter. Only a collective effort can yield a positive outcome.

BHUMIKA, JALANDHAR

## Laapataa Ladies finds its place

With reference to *Laapataa Ladies finds its way to Oscars*, is official entry for Best Foreign Film; the heart-rending film directed by Kiran Rao is a perfect representation of women's resilience and determination. The storyline revolves around two women who navigate their journey as they get lost on their way to their in-laws, shedding light on the harsh realities of rural India. The film showcases India's vibrant culture, challenging stereotypes and biases. The fact that this movie is in the running for an Oscar is a testament to India's cinema's power to bring about a change. The efficacious storytelling, powerful performances and stunning cinematography make it worthy of global recognition.

SALONI SHARMA, JAMMU

## Get the farms in order

The article 'Punjab's agri draft policy fails to tick all the boxes' has rightly thrown light on the challenges being faced by the farm sector. It is unfortunate that the government has failed to fix issues pertaining to the leasing of land by small and marginal farmers. There are other difficulties, like the failure of cooperative societies and the high cost of fertilisers and marketing. The authorities concerned must seek help from distinguished agriculture specialists to address problems like soil degradation and pollution.

SAKSHAM, JIND

# Renaming of Port Blair steeped in jingoistic politics



**LT GEN BHOPIINDER SINGH (RETD)**  
FORMER LT GOVERNOR,  
ANDAMAN & NICOBAR  
AND PUDUCHERRY

**I**F there is one place in the country that needs no lessons on patriotism or the constitutional idea of 'unity in diversity', it is the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The majority of its population (around five lakh) is composed of the descendants of freedom fighters incarcerated by the British. Others include subsequent settlers and the members of native tribes like the Negrito Jarawas, Onges, Great Andamanese and Sentinelese (arguably the last protected tribe unconnected with the outside world), or Mongoloid tribes like Shompen and Nicobarese.

fied by the usage of a quaint 'Hindustani' dialect that cuts across religions, regions and ethnicities. Bengalis, Tamilians, Purvanchalis and Punjabis live cheek by jowl, uncorrupted by the toxic polarisation and manufactured political 'divide' that consume the Indian mainland. In a perverse manner, the distance (1,200 km from either Chennai or Kolkata) and natural isolation from the vile politics of the mainland have ensured the ideal 'mini-India' there.

The dominant 'us vs them' narrative is not among religions or ethnicities but in the collective 'islanders vs mainlanders' realm, where the mainlanders are viewed as usurpers. On the islands, views on history are far more nuanced than the binary understanding in the mainland. For example, there are mixed feelings about Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's three-year alliance with the Japanese, as those years are associated with the kind of brutality that outdid that of the British.

These peaceful islanders have embraced their tumultuous, complicated and wounded history as their factual identity without resorting to revisionism or the rewriting of history. It is believed that when two wings of the Cellular Jail were demolished after Independence, many freedom fighters had objected to attempts at tinkering



**CHANGE:** The capital of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Port Blair, was recently renamed Sri Vijaya Puram. ISTOCK

with a place that signified their pain, as they believed that it also represented an important chapter of history. Their peaceful cohabitation with each other and even with its dark past ensured that it remained among the most inclusive societies in the country.

In 2006, as the administrator and gubernatorial appointee, I was tasked with conducting relief and rehabilitation on the islands that had suffered from the deadly tsunami of December 2004. As we recovered from the socioeconomic ravages caused by the natural disaster, I found immense succour in the way society held together. As a former combatant, I witnessed a sense of social conviviality,

Andaman & Nicobar residents have embraced their tumultuous history as part of their identity without resorting to revisionism.

timeless patriotism and a larger national purpose that is unique to far-flung border areas of the Leh region, Kashmir highlands or the extreme northeastern regions and remains unseen and underappreciated by the 'rest of India'.

Admittedly, a lot was achieved, but much remained to be done; the strategic location (overlooking the Chinese 'choke point' of the Strait of Malacca) of these islands—as also the instinct to protect vulnerable tribals and the natural green cover—necessitated certain constraints on conventional 'opening up' for development on the lines of Goa and Kerala. It needed a lot of government support in the absence of private develop-

ment—the challenge of infrastructure, civic facilities and employment opportunities persisted. Yet the 'shining outpost' of India held fast to its unique ways and history.

But it wasn't long before the winds of mainland 'normalcy' reached the pristine islands. One such phenomenon was the changing of names of popular places to promote nationalism. The Havelock, Neil and Ross islands were renamed Swaraj Dweep, Shaheed Dweep and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep, respectively. Given the islands' huge dependence on tourism and, therefore, on the need to develop touristy 'brands', marketing wisdom would advise against tinkering with names. After all, consistency of usage, brevity of nomenclature and building longstanding identity are commonsensical. Yet, names were changed not because the locals wanted so, but because of the hyper-nationalism formula. Many didn't make much of it initially in the hope that it would result in more transformational support from the government. It is another matter that Netaji's grandnephew Chandra Kumar Bose, who was the initial force behind this renaming initiative, later quit the ruling dispensation, claiming that he had received no support from the BJP to propagate the legendary freedom fighter's ideology.

Later, 21 uninhabited islands were renamed after

Param Vir Chakra awardees with much fanfare. As the rechristening was a homage to the truly deserving sons of India and had no practical implications, it was accepted. Yet, despite the posturing, the much-sought-after government investments have remained elusive.

The continuing project of nationalist aggrandisement has returned to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The capital, Port Blair, was recently renamed Sri Vijaya Puram. The islanders woke up to yet another ironical insistence on patriotism, ostensibly done to "free the nation from colonial imprints". That Archibald Blair (after whom Port Blair was named) was a relatively inconsequential naval surveyor in the Bombay Marine did not matter, as social media was abuzz with grave insinuations about him.

Calls made to some islanders about the renaming of Port Blair evoked a combination of indifference and exasperation. Such exercises have been undertaken many times before with little focus on what truly matters to the islanders. It is not wrong but just a repeat of jingoistic politics, especially for a people who can teach the rest of the country a thing or two about dignified patriotism (not hyper-nationalism), inclusivity and secularism. The real issue is meaningful development—and it is not being addressed.

# Centre must pull Manipur back from the brink of ruin



**MAJ GEN GG DWIVEDI (RETD)**  
EX-COMMANDER, MOUNTAIN  
DIVISION, MANIPUR

**A**BRIEF spell of fragile peace in the strife-torn Manipur was shattered by drone and rocket attacks early this month. The strikes were allegedly carried out by Kuki-Zo outfits against Meiteis. The fresh violence claimed 11 lives in just 10 days. Marked escalation led to widespread protests by locals. Students took to the streets demanding the resignation of state DGP Rajiv Singh and Security Adviser Kuldip Singh for their allegedly inept handling of the situation.

Manipur has been on the boil for the past almost one-and-a-half years, making it evident that the state government has failed to resolve the contentious issues. There is also a general impression of callousness on the part of the Central Government to solve the deep-rooted problems. In the absence of viable political initiatives, the Manipur crisis has aggravated sharply.

Known for its historic fault lines, Manipur has a diverse

cultural-religious profile, coupled with its demographic and economic asymmetries. Consequently, different communities have vied for the state's land and other natural resources. The underlying cause that led to the ongoing conflict was the controversial High Court order passed in March 2023, which recommended the inclusion of Meiteis in the list of Scheduled Tribes (STs). It implied that Meiteis, a majority and prosperous community, could purchase land and/or settle in the hill areas predominantly inhabited by the minority Kukis.

This contentious ruling was resisted by the Kukis, leading to the build-up of tension in the state. In the beginning of May last year, the situation took a serious turn, resulting in clashes between the two communities which had so far lived in harmony. Within days, over 100 persons were killed and around 60,000 displaced. The violence has been continuing since then, with the death toll mounting to around 240.

Due to the prolonged conflict, the divide between the two communities has fragmented the state. While Meiteis control the Imphal valley, Kukis dominate the hill districts of Churachandpur, Senapati and Tengnoupal. The Kukis are now demanding a separate hill state. Nagas are another major group in Manipur.



**HAUL:** Security personnel with arms and ammunition recovered from militants in Manipur. PTI

Although they have stayed away from the present conflict, the Nagas, too, harbour a longstanding demand for a separate administrative entity to include areas inhabited by them. Apparently, Manipur faces the threat of Balkanisation.

Meiteis and Kukis have heavily fortified their respective enclaves. The state looks like a war zone, with rival sides separated by buffer zones manned by the security forces to prevent dashes. Both communities have well-trained militias, largely composed of erstwhile militant outfits, armed with sophisticated weapons. These private armies often resort to savage killings and extortion.

Procuring modern arms is not a problem for any group, as there is a gun-running trail

President's rule should be imposed to bring the situation under control as people have lost faith in the state government.

originating from China and traversing through Myanmar. Further, the 'rebel groups' waging war against the military junta in Myanmar are also a lucrative source of weaponry. Besides, around 6,000 arms were looted from the state police armouries by locals with only a handful being recovered by the security forces till now.

It is obvious that the state and Central governments have chosen to override the problem, resorting to crisis management rather than finding a lasting solution. There is no roadmap to bring back normalcy in the region. The Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is practically governing Manipur through the Unified Headquarters. Presently, the ground situation is such that the Chief

Minister and his cabinet colleagues are reportedly unable to move around even in Imphal city.

Further, the state authorities are not on the same page. The DGP has openly admitted to the inability of the local police to handle the situation and has sought Central forces to take over. On the other hand, Rajkumar Imo Singh, an MLA and the CM's son-in-law, has asked the MHA to remove Central forces as they have proved to be 'ineffective'. Incidentally, the CM has also made a representation to the Governor, demanding the control of the Unified Headquarters. There is a rift between the Assam Rifles and the police, with both often indulging in a blame game.

The current crisis is no longer a conflict between two communities but has turned into a serious national security issue. It is high time to avoid political posturing and put a comprehensive action plan in place to salvage the situation.

The major reasons for the current mess are poor governance, political authoritarianism marked by a heavy-handed approach, polarised security forces, resurgence of militant outfits and heightened animosity between the belligerent communities. In addition, there is a strong perception among the locals that the Central Government is not serious about resolving the

conflict, but rather wants to keep it simmering.

To restore normalcy in Manipur, it is imperative that President's rule is imposed as people have lost faith in the state government, which is being seen as partisan. A new administrative structure needs to be put in place with a clear chain of command. The Unified Headquarters must be reconstituted. The Army needs to be given a free hand to undertake operations to disarm the militant groups and create a conducive environment for restoring peace. For this, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) will be required to be imposed in sensitive areas. Alongside, there is an urgent requirement for effective border management, given the turbulent conditions in the neighbourhood.

Above all, earnest efforts are needed to build trust between Meiteis and Kukis by involving civil society organisations. The ruling dispensation ought to shed its status-quo mindset and explore fresh alternatives. Manipur is on the edge, in a state of intense distress, deeply divided and bruised. It beckons the nation to take a call and resolve the long-pending conflict on priority, lest the situation deteriorate further, which would prove catastrophic.

### QUICK CROSSWORD

Crossword grid with numbers 1-21. The grid is partially filled with letters.

ACROSS: 1 Debar from office temporarily (7), 5 Pry meddlesomely (5), 8 Retaliation in kind (2,3,3,2,3), 9 Authoritative doctrine (5), 10 Travellers' suitcases etc. (7), 11 Vacillate (6), 12 Company of actors (6), 15 Denial (7), 17 Reside as paying guest (5), 19 According to general opinion (2,3,8), 20 Provide with (5), 21 Unsteady, liable to fall (7).  
DOWN: 1 Tolerate (5), 2 Dexterity in conjuring (7,2,4), 3 To raise (7), 4 Draw absent-mindedly (6), 5 Colloquial language (5), 6 Superfluity (13), 7 Come before (7), 11 Hard-wearing (7), 13 Exclude from consideration (4,3), 14 Draw forth (6), 16 Soothing ointment (5), 18 Attempt (5).  
Yesterday's solution  
Across: 1 Blast, 8 One or two, 9 Today, 10 Top brass, 11 Given, 12 Raw, 16 Attune, 17 Outing, 18 Den, 23 Unity, 24 Let loose, 25 Joker, 26 By rights, 27 Stiff.  
Down: 2 Look into, 3 Shakeout, 4 Angola, 5 Doubt, 6 Steak, 7 Boost, 12 Red, 13 Won, 14 Stand out, 15 In itself, 19 Ersatz, 20 Globe, 21 Stark, 22 Rough.

### SU DO KU

Sudoku grid with numbers 1-9. The grid is partially filled with numbers.

### FORECAST

Weather forecast table for Chandigarh and other cities. Includes sunrise, sunset, and temperature data.

CALENDAR: SEPTEMBER 25, 2024, WEDNESDAY. Lists Shaka Samvat, Aashwin Shaka, Aashwin Parvishte, Hijari, Krishna Paksha Tithi, Varyan Yoga, and Aardra Nakshatra.

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