

Opinion

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Jon Rahm announced his departure for the LIV Golf Tour in December

Game changers

PGA Tour has lost Jon Rahm and Rory McIlroy



OVER THE TOP
Meraj Shah

IT'S A PR fiasco. Not only is defending champion Jon Rahm not in the field at The Sentry — this week's ongoing event on the PGA Tour — but 2023's Player of the Year award has been presented to Scottie Scheffler on the sidelines of the event. Scheffler has been the dominant force in world golf for the past two seasons. In 2023 he won twice on the PGA Tour including the much coveted Players Championship. But Rahm, who was n't able to defend his title this week, won four times in 2023 — including the Masters Tournament — and played a key role in Europe's Ryder Cup win. Not surprisingly, there's been some controversy about the award: Rahm was almost considered a shoo-in before he dramatically announced his departure for the LIV Golf Tour in December 2023.

All in all, not the kind of media attention you want around your event, and one has to feel for the sponsors of The Sentry. The only saving grace, possibly, could be that Scheffler, who, at a cumulative score of 16-under-par leads the field by a stroke at the time of writing, wins The Sentry. Just to reaffirm his credentials, as it were, as the man in form.

The good bit to emerge from this latest development is that it does appear like the LIV Golf - PGA Tour saga is finally on its last legs. The deadline to close the 'deal', which was expected to be signed by the end of 2023, has now been extended into 2024. Even the PGA Tour's biggest supporters agree that Rahm's departure has given the Saudi-backed league decisive leverage in the ongoing merger negotiations between the two Tours. And that's not all: Rahm's departure has been followed by public statements by Rory McIlroy in which the Ulsterman has diplomatically admitted that he may have been a bit hasty in his previous criticisms of players who've shifted to the LIV Golf Tour and has come out in support of Rahm.

"It's hard to sit here and criticise Jon because of what a great player he is and the experiences I've had with him, but all I would say is that I will be disappointed not to play against him more regularly in the future," he told *Sky Sports*. He also indicated that he couldn't foresee a European Ryder Cup team bereft of Rahm. "Jon is going to be in Bethpage in 2025 so because of this decision the European Tour is going to have to rewrite the rules for Ryder Cup eligibility, there's no question about that. I certainly want Jon Rahm on the next Ryder Cup team," he said. McIlroy's comments aren't necessarily a volte-face but more of an acknowledgement of a new reality, a new ecosystem that he's going to be a part of, considering that the purse strings will rest clearly with the Saudis, it would have appeared like bad form for him to continue to publicly denounce them.

It reads almost like a playbook. The way a well-funded entrant came in and disrupted a complacent professional sports league, weaned away the latter's

best players, exposed the former's inadequacies, capitalised on its weaknesses, and eventually usurped control over the sport. It has now come to light that overtures made by the PIF to the PGA Tour, back when the sovereign wealth fund was exploring investment into sport, were ignored. Clearly, that snub didn't go down well.

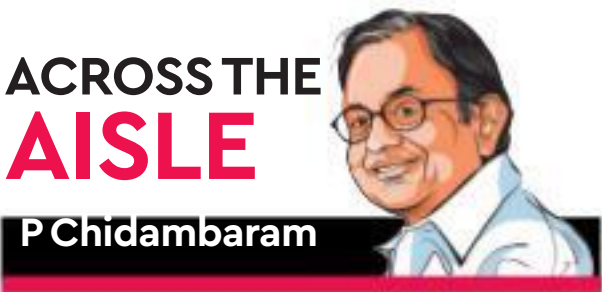
At this juncture, no one can expect a player of Rahm's calibre to reject a deal that is reportedly worth an astonishing \$500 million, when it is likely that the new pro golf landscape is likely to be dominated by the PIF sooner rather than later. This is what makes Rahm's suspension from the PGA Tour somewhat counterproductive — the Tour needs to prioritise preserving the interests of its sponsors. The suspension has meant that Rahm wasn't able to defend his title at The Sentry this week. And let's face it, Rahm is unlikely to be heartbroken about missing out there. The sponsors miss out on the buzz a star presence would have created, and so do golf fans.

At the end of the day, while winning on the PGA Tour is a career goal for all professionals, elite players focus mostly on Major Championships. Earlier during the week, on the sidelines of The Sentry tournament, Patrick Cantlay recounted an anecdote from the time he visited Tiger Woods' house in 2021. With three wins and the FedEx title, Cantlay had just won the PGA Tour's Player of the Year award and was, self-admittedly feeling quite chuffed about that. "I went over to Tiger's house, I think to talk Ryder Cup after I had won Player of the Year, and it felt like a big deal to me at the time that I had got a Player of the Year, and they give you this little Jack Nicklaus bronze trophy," Cantlay told the media. "So we're walking through Tiger's house and we're in the basement and he's got like, 11 of em lined up right next to each other all in the corner of the basement — boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom."

It reminds me of the comments McIlroy made a couple of years back at The Masters Tournament about how Woods only displays trophies from wins at golf's four major events. "I went over to Tiger's house a few weeks ago to see him, and in his family room he's got his trophy cabinet, and it's his 15 major trophies," McIlroy said. "I said, 'That's really cool. Where are all the others?'" McIlroy said Woods didn't even seem to know, telling him, "My mom has some, and a few are in the office, and a few are wherever... I'm just thinking to myself, how easy it must have felt for him if all he cared about were four weeks a year. The other stuff must have been like practice. So that's like a really — that's a cool perspective to have," he said.

Come 2024, and I think it's a fair conjecture that most of the top players in the world, McIlroy and Rahm included, have come around to precisely that point of view. Nothing like visiting the Big Cat to get something on your place in golfing history and what's really important. As for Scheffler, I suspect that the 2023 Player of the Year trophy isn't going to find pride of place in Scheffler's trophy cabinet. Still hope he wins The Sentry tonight.

Agolfer, Meraj Shah also writes about the game



The policies that guide the government are of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. Even among the rich, the policies favour concentration of wealth and oligopolies if not monopolies. I think that the New Year may make some people happy but will leave major sections of the people unhappy

THIS IS THE first column in calendar 2024 and I renew my good wishes for a Happy New Year. Happiness is a sum of many parts. There are 142 crore individuals in India belonging to different sections of the people and I have wondered who is happy and who is not.

In recent days, I have read a spate of articles that vociferously endorsed the government's claim that *everybody is happy*. Because, the authors claimed, India had witnessed *unprecedented* economic growth and the benefits have flowed to *every* section of the people. I do not deny that the economy has registered growth but it is certainly not unprecedented. The 'golden period of growth' was the three UPAYears between 2005-2008 when GDP grew by 9.5, 9.6 and 9.3% a year. Under Prime Minister Modi, the economy has grown in the last nine years by an average rate of 5.7%. Adding the estimated growth of 7.3% in 2023-24, the average rate will still be 5.9%. That is *not* unprecedented or spectacular; it is satisfactory growth, but neither well-spread nor sufficient.

The happy people

The government's economic policies lean toward low direct taxes, high and often oppressive indirect taxes coupled with coercive measures, capital investment in hard infrastructure like roads, railways, ports and airports (with insufficient allocation for education and healthcare) and subsidies to certain sections like women. The satisfactory growth rate has made some sections happy. I can count the satisfied sections: big and medium corporates; high net worth individuals; bankers; stock market investors, traders and brokers; purchasers of distressed assets; software professionals; big traders; professionals like judges, chartered accountants, doctors and lawyers; university and college teachers;



Under PM Narendra Modi, the economy has grown in the last nine years by an average rate of 5.7%

FILE PHOTO: PTI

It's Happy New Year for some

government employees; rich agriculturists; and money lenders.

The dark side

The dark side of the picture is that many sections of the people are left behind — some are even left out — and these sections account for the vast majority of the people. The first section comprises *82 crore Indians who are given free ration of 5 kg per person per month*. The free ration scheme is not a badge of honour to mark economic progress or prosperity. Free ration is a sign of widespread malnourishment and, in many places, of hunger. Why are over half the families in the country unable to afford staples like rice or wheat? The answer is because of low income and/or unemployment. Government has no policy to address these twin burning issues.

MGNREGS was intended to address the issue of low family income, and to supplement it, but the government's antipathy to the scheme has been evident from the very beginning. Since April 2022, the government has deleted 7.6 crore workers from the list of registered workers. Of the current lists, over one-third of the registered workers (8.9 crore) and one-eighth of the active workers (1.8 crore) are ineligible due to the introduction of the Aadhaar Based Payment System. Absent support from MGN-

REGS, how are these individuals and families coping with life? Life is extremely difficult for them and, certainly, they are not happy.

Without job, with inflation

The other major section that is unhappy is *people without jobs*. The government no longer talks about creating jobs. It believes that it can delude the people by talking about the reported increase in self-employment. Self-employment, in a country where the average number of years that a child spends in school is 7-8 years, and with no skill training, means unemployment. The so-called self-employed young man or woman gets work irregularly and at a wage/income that is flat or lower net of inflation (compared to regular employment). There are no other benefits or security. Youth unemployment rate is 10.0% and among graduates under the age of 25 years the rate is 42%. Surely, they are not happy.

Another set of unhappy people are *those hit by inflation*. That includes everyone except the top 10% that owns 60% of the nation's wealth and earns 57% of the national income. The average inflation in 2022 was 6.7%. In 2023, inflation breached the upper limit of the 2-6% band in four of the 12 months. In November

2023, inflation was 5.55%. Food inflation, currently, is 7.7%. According to the RBI's monthly bulletin of December 2023, "inflation will likely remain elevated relative to targets." Inflation has resulted in reduction in consumption and household savings, and household liabilities have increased. The government has abdicated its responsibility to control inflation and left the task to the RBI. It is aversive to reducing indirect taxes (to lessen the burden of prices on the poor) because, I suspect, it is not sure if it will be able to meet the fiscal deficit target.

The modest growth achieved in the Modi years has not been shared by large sections of the people because the policies of the government have failed to deal with inflation and unemployment. Besides, the policies that guide the government are *of the rich, by the rich and for the rich*. Even among the rich, the policies favour concentration of wealth and oligopolies if not monopolies. I think that the New Year may make some people happy but will leave major sections of the people unhappy.

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E-auction of flats by DDA: How efficient, equitable, fair?

THE RECENTLY CONCLUDED e-auction of penthouses, MIG and super HIG flats on January 5 has revealed some interesting data to ponder upon. The report published in various newspapers on Saturday reveals that seven of 14 penthouses (50%) were booked with the highest bid of ₹5.77 crore, against the reserve price of ₹5 crore approximately, which is approximately 15% above the reserve price. The response in SHIG flats seems better. As many as 138 units of 170 (81%) flats under the SHIG category have been booked with the highest bid price of ₹4.52 crore against the reserve price of approximately ₹2.5 crore, that is approximately 80% above the reserve price. The MIG flats have received poor response. Only 129 flats were booked against the offered 963 flats (316 in Lok Nayak Puram & 647 in Sector 14 of Dwarka), which is approximately 13% only.

Let us first understand the process of e-auction. The auction was held against individual flat and the applicants who had registered against that flat and paid EMD were allowed to bid. For example, let us assume that three applicants had applied for a particular flat, say H201 (SHIG), then the price war will be among them only. If the price of flat H201 goes beyond the capacity of any bidder, he

does not have the option to change and bid for some other flat in the SHIG category. This is the precise reason for some flats going unsold, even in the SHIG category, and the price of one particular flat went as high as ₹4.52 crore, almost touching the reserve price of a penthouse. Therefore, the question arises is it a fair, equitable, and efficient auction from both DDA and flat buyer perspectives? Is there any alternative method for auction available?

From the buyers' perspective perhaps the present auction method may not be considered equitable, as the price discovery is not fair. For example, consider the psychology of the flat buyer, who bids for a particular SHIG flat at ₹4.52 crore, when she finds out that her neighbour got it at a much lower price (It could be that some flats sold out at just above the reserve price). Is the price of ₹4.52 crore a fair discovery through auction? Definitely not. It is an outcome of the auction process which is not efficient. Had all SHIG flats fetched similar prices then one could say it was a fair discovery of price. From the DDA perspective also it may not be an ideal result, wherein some flats are booked at excessively high prices but many went unsold.

Consider the alternate auction methodology — SMRA auction (simultaneous multi-round auction). Under this method, one need not apply for a particular flat, as against the existing method. One just submits their interest by way of depositing EMD. For example, if some participant had deposited ₹25 lakh as EMD (the highest kept for penthouses) then she should be eligible to bid on all categories of flats. If one has deposited only ₹20 lakh then she will be eligible to bid SHIG, HIG and MIG flats

only, and not the penthouse. Suppose someone has deposited ₹40 lakh and first participated in a penthouse and got one unit then her EMD of ₹25 lakh gets consumed and she can now bid for HIG and MIG flats only if wishes to do so, but is not eligible for SHIG (because here one needs ₹20 lakh EMD and so on so forth.

Under SMRA auction, flats of all categories can be put to auction simultaneously or can be done category-wise. The result will remain the same. For the simplicity of understanding let us say it is category-wise. Start with a penthouse auction and put all flats (14) simultaneously for eligible buyers (who had deposited ₹25 lakh or more as EMD) to bid for any flat. The auction will remain open and continue for such time when no higher bid is received for any flat put to auction at the extended closure time.

The advantage of such a bidding system is that all the eligible bidders get an equal chance to bid for all available flats, thereby all flats put to auction get a fair price discovery at the end of the auction. Let us understand it with the 14 penthouse cases. Someone who bid the highest — ₹5.77 crore — must have piped the H2 bidder. Had a chance, H2 might have opted for the unsold penthouse. Maybe the H1 bidder could have gone for another penthouse, thereby not opting for the artificial jump in price. Similarly, the H3 bidder might have gone for an alternate flat. Thus, in

the end, a fair market price for all 14 flats, definitely below the present highest bid of ₹5.77 crore, could have been obtained, and all 14 could have been sold. Once the auction for the penthouse is done, the next auction for SHIG follows a similar process.

The biggest advantage of SMRA is the fair discovery of market price with equal participation by eligible bidders and likely chances that all flats put to auction are sold out. It also takes care of last-minute technical glitches like network problems; computer hang problems, etc, of any individual bidder because all flats are open for the auction till it ends not like the present system where a few flats must have ended in a maximum of two or three rounds of time extension and if any participants of that flat by any chance get technical glitch at last moment, she have lost the chance.

Department of Telecommunication, Government of India, does spectrum auctions using the SMRA principle, which is fair and equitable to all eligible bidder. One may argue that the number of bidders is very few TSPs only, as compared to thousands of flat buyers, but that can be taken care of through proper auction rules and the auction design. I got the opportunity to conduct a spectrum auction in 2016 as a nodal officer and can say with confidence that many officers from my service cadre (IP&TAFS) have the expertise to design an e-auction process using SMRA principles for DDA flats to discover the fair market price, which can become a future model.

Rajesh Kumar Pathak is Secretary, Technology Development Board



India recorded 774 COVID-19 cases in the 24 hours to 8 a.m. on Saturday, the Union Health Ministry said. The number of active cases stands at 4,187. Two deaths, one each from Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, were reported in the 24 hours, the Ministry's data show. "The number of daily cases was in double digits till December 5 but it began to rise again amid cold weather conditions and after the emergence of a new COVID-19 variant, JN.1," an official source said. "The currently available data suggest that the JN.1 variant is neither leading to an exponential rise in the new cases nor a surge in hospitalisation and mortality," the source said. ^{PTI}

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Saturday said that Lord Macaulay, a British politician commonly regarded as the 'Father of English Education in India', was sent to "throttle India's traditional system of education and to mentally enslave the people of the country". Mr. Singh added that the revival of *gurukuls* was necessary to counter the effects of the Macaulayist system of education on Indian minds. The Union Minister shared his views in Haridwar, where he lay the foundation stone of Baba Ramdev's *Patanjali Gurukulam avam Acharyakulam*, a school which purportedly runs on the ancient Indian education system, and will be built at an estimated cost of ₹250 crore.

The Mumbai Police have formed a special team to investigate e-mails which threatened that bomb blasts will be carried out at multiple places in the city, an official said on Saturday. The team is trying to trace the sender of the e-mails based on the IP address from where they originated, an official of the Colaba police station said. The mails were sent from a single ID and the sender had not been identified yet, he added. A case under Indian Penal Code Sections 505 (1) (b) (circulating rumour with intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, fear or alarm to the public) and 506 (2) (criminal intimidation), and other relevant provisions has been registered.

Three officials of Madhya Pradesh's Women and Child Department were suspended and two were issued show-cause notices after a children's home was found running illegally on the outskirts of Bhopal. After an inspection of Anchal Children's Home in Bhopal's Tarasewaniya village on January 4, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) found that the centre was being run illegally as a ChildLine centre. At least 27 girls were said to be missing from the centre but Chief Minister Mohan Yadav later said that all the girls were safe. An FIR has also been filed against the children's home and its manager, identified as Anil Mathew.

SUDOKU

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

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

SUBOKU Sexual abuse in Odisha's boarding schools for tribes demotivate first-generation learners

With the amendment, the words 'Good Manufacturing Practices' (GMP) have been replaced with 'Good Manufacturing Practices and Requirements of



The changes introduced in the revised Schedule M include the introduction of a pharmaceutical quality

It adds that companies must market a finished product only after getting "satisfactory results" on tests of the ingredients and retain a sufficient quantity of the samples of interme-

The revised rules are to be implemented based on company turnovers where the medium and small manufacturers include those with an annual turnover of less than ₹250 crore and large manufacturers include those with an annual turnover of over ₹250 crore.

"Quality is king. But better quality is probably the emperor," the Minister said, adding that quality is cost-effective which in turn helps the industry and



He said that after studying the gap analysis, a comprehensive network of state-of-the-art modern labs was set up to facilitate BIS and industry. "BIS recently agreed to invest ₹40 crore to set up 21 labs for cotton testing," he said and asked the industry to come forward with areas for which testing is required.

In response to another question on the same day by Omprakash Bhupalsinh, aka Pawan Rajenimbalkar, the Ministry revealed details of the number of persons arrested, chargeshheeted, convicted and acquitted for human trafficking between 2018 and



The number of persons chargesheeted stands at 19,821, with an average of 3,500-4,000 persons a year. The number of those

The number of accused who have been acquitted in the five years stands at 4,936.

Kaushik Gupta, an advo-

Maharashtra registered the highest number of cases – 1,392 – in the past five years, followed by Telangana (1,301) and Andhra Pradesh (987).

“When it comes to trafficking, some are source

The States such as West Bengal and Assam are considered source States, while Maharashtra and Karnataka are destination States. The Ministry, in its reply, has also pointed out the steps taken to combat trafficking. These include upgrading the infrastructure of district anti-human trafficking units and strengthening intelligence and surveillance mechanisms to identify gangs and gather information about their modus operandi.

The error was not so grave as to constitute wrong or misleading information, he observed.

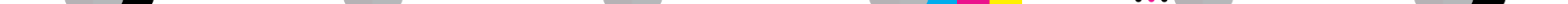
Having reviewed the troubling history of sexual abuse against girls in the State's residential schools, a government-run research institute recommended in 2018 that regular health check-ups, with pregnancy tests for girls, be conducted immediately after the vacation. This was

“Many girls who study in residential schools are first-generation learners. Steps should be taken to ensure their safety on school campuses and out-

Bleak statistics
State Scheduled Tribe Development Minister Jagannath Saraka laid out the bleak official statistics on the floor of the Assembly in September 2023. Replying to a query, he said that over the past five years, there were 22 cases of sexual assault in the 188 residential high schools exclusively for tribal girls, with 34 people being named as accused. Twelve girl students had given birth. There are 62,385 girls studying in these schools.

"There were some cases where the boarder girls were sexually abused by the teaching or non-teaching staff of the school. In some other cases, girls were abused by outsiders, even relatives, during vacations. Enquiry reports reveal that boarder girls are often used as domestic help by the school staff

In his reply in the Assembly, the Minister had said that the government was taking all possible steps including provision of toll-free telephones for lodging complaints, the installation of closed circuit television cameras, putting up of complaint boxes, maintaining in-and-out registers, institution of sexual harassment committees, and health check-ups.

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SCIENCE

Study reveals the oldest evidence of photosynthesis

The Hindu Bureau

The oldest evidence of photosynthetic structures reported to date has been identified inside a collection of 1.75-billion-year-old microfossils, a paper published in the journal *Nature* reveals. The discovery helps to shed light on the evolution of oxygenic photosynthesis.

Oxygenic photosynthesis, in which sunlight catalyses the conversion of water and carbon dioxide into

glucose and oxygen, is unique to cyanobacteria and related organelles within eukaryotes. Cyanobacteria had an important role in the evolution of early life and were active during the Great Oxidation Event around 2.4 billion years ago, but the timings of the origins of oxygenic photosynthesis are debated owing to limited evidence.

Catherine Demoulin from the University of Liège, Liège, Belgium and others present direct evi-

dence of fossilised photosynthetic structures from *Navifusa majensis*. The microstructures are thylakoids; membrane-bound structures found inside the chloroplasts of plants and some modern cyanobacteria. The authors identified them in fossils from two different locations, but the oldest, which come from the McDermott Formation in Australia, are 1.75 billion years old.

N. majensis is presumed to be a cyanobacterium.

The discovery of thylakoids in a specimen of this age suggests that photosynthesis may have evolved at some point before 1.75 billion years ago. It does not, however, solve the mystery of whether photosynthesis evolved before or after the Great Oxidation Event. Similar ultrastructural analyses of older microfossils could help to answer this question, the authors say, and help to determine whether the evolution of thylakoids

contributed to the rise in oxygen levels at the time of the Great Oxidation Event.

Thylakoids represent direct ultrastructural evidence for oxygenic photosynthesis metabolism. Thylakoid membranes are dense, mostly galactolipid, protein-containing bilayers in which photosynthesis occurs in photosynthetic organisms. “The discovery of preserved thylakoids in *N. majensis* from both the Shaler Supergroup and Tawallah Group provides di-

rect evidence for oxygenic photosynthesis, for a cyanobacterial affinity and for metabolically active vegetative cell rather than a cyst (akinete) stage for these specimens,” they note.

“We predict that similar ultrastructural analyses of well-preserved microfossils might expand the geological record of oxygenic photosynthesisers, and of early, weakly oxygenated ecosystems in which complex cells developed,” they write.

SNAPSHOTS



Target for a gut condition in malnourished children found

Scientists have discovered promising treatment strategies for a gut condition that commonly afflicts malnourished children in developing countries, according to a new study involving mice and data from 115 children in Zambia. By identifying key signatures of environmental enteric dysfunction (EED), their study suggests that a high protein diet, supplementation of a coenzyme, or a bile acid sequestrant (or a combination thereof) could reverse the disorder’s damaging effects on the intestines.



A contrast agent advances MRI diagnosis of brain injury

A team of researchers has designed a ‘living contrast’ agent for MRI of the brain, allowing them to detect episodes of mild traumatic brain injury more effectively in a large animal model. Their imaging agent is based on micropatches that capture immune cells that tend to infiltrate the brain after traumatic brain injury, and could provide a powerful diagnostic tool for clinical monitoring and therapeutic research. Nearly 60-90% of mild traumatic brain injury cases currently go undiagnosed.



Isolation technique to study long-lived plasma cells

By examining the effects of a SARS-CoV-2 vaccine in large animals, scientists have developed a pipeline to isolate and study long-lived plasma cells that produce antibodies. Their technique provides a means to detect these rare cells and could inform studies of the immune system. Long-lived plasma cells originate in germinal centres and usually take up residence in the bone marrow. There, they secrete antibodies and help protect against pathogens over long periods.



Question Corner

Genetic changes

Did marine snails switch from laying eggs to giving birth?

By studying an evolutionarily recent transition from egg-laying to live-bearing in a marine snail, collaborative research by three global institutions has shed new light on the genetic changes that allow organisms to make the switch. The egg did come first. Egg-laying arose deep in evolutionary time, long before animals even made their way onto land. The seaside marine snail *Littorina saxatilis* is the most misidentified creature in the world. Although live-bearing is the only trait that

distinguishes *L. saxatilis* from its egg-laying relatives, *L. saxatilis* did not seem to form a single evolutionary group. “We were able to identify 50 genomic regions that together seem to determine whether individuals lay eggs or give birth to live young,” Sean Stankowski from the Institute of Science and Technology Austria (ISTA) says in a release. Overall, the results suggest that live-bearing evolved gradually through the accumulation of many mutations that arose over the last 100,000 years.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

Should India study wastewater to track malaria, dengue?

Choosing priority pathogens for wastewater surveillance should be based not just on feasibility of the detection but also on the geographical context of the disease, pathogen biology, and availability of sewage network

R. Prasad

Wastewater surveillance is an excellent tool to monitor the presence of specific pathogens well before they can be detected through laboratory testing. It has been routinely used for decades for tracking the polio virus in almost every country. Water-borne viruses can be best studied through testing sewage samples. If wastewater surveillance provides accurate information about the presence of polio virus excreted by humans, in the case of other pathogens, for instance SARS-CoV-2 virus, it helps provide information on new variants and virus load which serves as a proxy for the extent of virus spread in the community. The biggest advantage of wastewater surveillance is that it is cost-effective and can independently confirm the presence of pathogens before laboratory testing throws up a warning signal.

For instance, wastewater surveillance carried out by the Tata Institute for Genetics and Society (TIGS) in Bengaluru was able to detect a silent wave of the XBB.1.16 Omicron variant in the city last year.

With the usefulness of wastewater surveillance during the pandemic established, researchers in developed countries have used it for tracking other diseases such as monkeypox, influenza and cholera. In a paper published in November last year in the journal *Science Translational Medicine*, researchers in the U.S. have suggested that wastewater

Identifying priority pathogens

Wastewater surveillance has been routinely used for decades for tracking polio virus



Independent: Wastewater surveillance does not rely on access to healthcare and people getting tested. MANOJ KUMAR

- During the pandemic, countries relied on wastewater surveillance to track new SARS-CoV-2 variants and to know the extent of virus spread in the community
- Many countries have used wastewater surveillance to track other diseases such as monkeypox, influenza and cholera
- U.S. researchers have suggested that wastewater surveillance be expanded to track dengue, malaria, Zika and typhoid
- Unlike in India, malaria and dengue outbreaks are rare in the U.S. and European countries. Developed countries also have excellent sewage network, which makes it easy to track these pathogens
- Besides humans shedding the pathogens through stools, several mammals, including nonhuman primates, serve as reservoir hosts of malaria and dengue
- For vector-borne diseases, wastewater surveillance is not an ideal solution in India

surveillance be expanded to track dengue, malaria, Zika and typhoid.

“The U.S. and Europe don’t have much dengue and are unlikely to test fevers for dengue or malaria unless they know it is around (which may happen from environmental surveillance need careful consideration since clinical cases are likely to be tested for known causes,” says Dr. Gagandeep Kang, former Professor at CMC Vellore.

In a paper published in the journal *Trends in Parasitology*, Dr. Farah Ishtiaq from the Bengaluru-based Tata Institute for Genetics and Society, which has been using wastewater surveillance to study SARS-

CoV-2 burden in Bengaluru, says that employing wastewater surveillance for vector-borne pathogens should take into account the geographical context, pathogen biology, and the availability of sewage networks.

There have been recent outbreaks of malaria and dengue in the U.S., and Portugal. However, the U.S. and European countries rarely report malaria and dengue. The developed countries also have excellent sewage networks, which makes it easy to track these pathogens. Finally, transmission is seasonal, if at all.

But in India, malaria and dengue are endemic and pathogen transmission takes place almost throughout the year. “Importantly, besides people shedding the pathogens

through stools, there are several mammals, including nonhuman primates, that serve as reservoir hosts of malaria and dengue. So in a tropical country like India, it is difficult to say that all the malaria and dengue microbes detected in wastewater are excreted only by humans,” Dr. Ishtiaq says.

In the case of dengue, virus shedding by humans is low. This makes it difficult to detect dengue viral RNA in wastewater at levels similar to SARS-CoV-2 RNA. “Using wastewater surveillance to detect malaria or dengue pathogens and find the actual burden of the disease in the community in a setting like ours is a challenge,” says Dr. Ishtiaq.

“For vector-borne diseases, wastewater surveillance is not enough. Where

we are trying to solve the problem through vector surveillance, mosquito surveillance should not be sidelined and wastewater surveillance be seen as a solution.” Unlike water-borne pathogens such as rotavirus and hepatitis which are passed through human excreta, vector-borne diseases that have other reservoir hosts will be a challenge to study through wastewater surveillance, she adds.

“There is a huge push to identify priority pathogens for wastewater surveillance, which is welcome for water-borne diseases, influenza, etc. But if asked to prioritise dengue and malaria I will think hard as I know that the signal I will get will not exclusively be from humans,” Dr. Ishtiaq stresses. One of the key criteria for the selection of priority pathogens of wastewater-based surveillance is that pathogens are stable in the wastewater and are consistently shed in the faecal material or urine.

In August 2022, besides the SARS-CoV-2 virus, Bangladesh launched a proof-of-concept wastewater surveillance programme to track and monitor three other vaccine-preventable pathogens including *Salmonella typhi*, *Vibrio cholerae*, and rotavirus in the communities.

“When selecting priority pathogens of wastewater surveillance, it is essential to consider the limitations and challenges that arise from different sanitation systems and host-parasite geography before drawing conclusions from wastewater surveillance data,” she writes.

Dining on wild foodstuffs



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE
D. Balasubramanian

Great emphasis is laid on the concept of biodiversity in our times. The importance of preserving biodiversity has been accepted in the policy frameworks of most Governments. It is therefore ironic that the food eaten by the people of the world has become extremely low in diversity. Rice, wheat, maize, and sugar provide over 50% of the total calorie intake of all of us.

The fresh produce sections of our supermarkets also reflect this trend and carry a monotonously limited selection of vegetables.

This reduction in “dietary diversity” influences the quality of our diets. Eating food from many different food groups improves nutrition. But the practice of monoculture - growing one crop or vegetable on large tracts of land - only reduces “agricultural biodiversity”. One alternative, to transport food groups from distant regions, raises costs and carries a heavy environmental penalty.

Wide variety

Farmers with small holdings, Shepherds on pastoral lands and tribal populations that practice agroforestry are major contributors to nutritional variety in our country. When we talk of local varieties, we usually refer to vegetables and crops provided on a small scale by



Diverse harvest: Northeast India's Jhum agriculture grew 20 different food crops on the same piece of land. RITU RAJ KONWAR

these people. The choice, varying from region to region, can be quite extraordinary. In South India, we have leafy greens that are rich in iron and calcium, such as the Green Amaranth (Tamil, kuppi keera; Hindi, jungle chaulai) and Leucas (Tamil, thumbai; Sanskrit, Drona pushpi). Starchy tubers, such as

east Indian arrowroot (Tamil, kuva or ararut-kizharu; Hindi, tikhur) whose powdered tubers (also called Travancore starch) are nutritious and particularly good for sensitive stomachs.

More commonly available, and a vitamin C powerhouse, is the Indian gooseberry (Tamil, nelli; Hindi,

amla). In Central India, we have the madhuca or Indian butter tree (Tamil, ilupai; Hindi, mahua) whose flowers are edible, and the seeds have oil. The khejri, the state tree of Rajasthan (Tamil, parambai) has pods that make the tasty sighri bhaaji, while also warding off desertification. All of us probably have a favourite ‘wild’ vegetable, fruit, berry, or root that is rarely found.

Jhum cultivation

The indigenous people of Northeast India practiced a form of agriculture, called jhum, in which about 20 different food crops would be grown on the same piece of land. This form of cultivation is a total antithesis of modern agricultural practices but offers plenty of diversity in their diets. Sadly, this form of cultiva-

tion is losing ground. Researchers at the Central Agricultural University at Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh have documented that the area under jhum cultivation, in the West Garo district alone, had shrunk from 1,328 sq. km in the year 2000 to 112 sq. km. In 2015. Areca nut, black pepper and rubber became the preferred crops on this land (Pandey et al, Food Security, 2022).

The consumer and his tastes influence the availability of a wide variety of wild varieties.

Adding wood apples (velam pazham) and Jamuns (nagai) will only enhance the nutritive quality of your diet while helping small growers.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)

How has Red Sea trouble impacted India?

Why are cargo ships taking a longer route around the Cape of Good Hope? Will imports and exports be affected?

N. Ravi Kumar

The story so far:
Aspate of attacks on cargo ships in the Red Sea since November by the Houthi militia of Yemen has turned the quickest marine route linking Asia with Europe through the Suez Canal unsafe. It has forced freighters to take a longer transit around the Cape of Good Hope in Africa’s southern tip, making shipments both dearer and longer to deliver. It has compounded the woes of global trade as it emerges from the aftermath of the pandemic, feels the heat of the Russia-Ukraine war and grapples with a global economic slowdown.

What is the impact on Indian trade flowing through the Red Sea?

After the attacks, major cargo shipping lines decided they would not operate on this route. Even small feeder vessels have of late stopped plying in these waters. Almost 90% of western hemisphere cargo, both inbound or shipped from India, that used to go through the Red Sea is now getting re-routed through the Cape of Good Hope, according to the Federation of Indian Export Organisations’ Director-General Ajay Sahai. Whether exporting to Europe, the U.S. east coast and even to countries in North Africa, the longer route is being used. The

While all consignments are likely to be impacted by the increase in freight cost, the pinch would be felt most by low value, high volume cargo as well as perishables

remaining 10% of Indian import or export cargo is either not moving or using a transit facility. The impact of this move varies on the type of buyer-seller contract. If it is FOB (free on board), the freight burden is on the buyer, and in CIF (cost, insurance and freight) or C&F (cost and freight) contracts, the freight has to be borne by the exporter. In cases of FOB, and where the buyers have comfortable inventory, they are asking the Indian exporter to hold back consignment. Likewise, exporters who have to bear the freight are requesting their buyers to allow them to hold the consignment given the increase in freight costs, which includes peak season surcharge and contingency surcharge. However, if there is zero inventory, the buyer would insist on shipment of the goods, according to Mr. Sahai. “Roughly 20-25% consignments are being held up. Container Corporation of India is saying about 25% of its containers are being held back by Indian exporters. Everybody is hoping the situation will normalise shortly, but looking into recent developments we are still keeping our fingers crossed,” adds Mr. Sahai. While all consignments are likely to be impacted by the increase in freight cost – by up to six-fold in some cases – and the longer voyage time, the pinch would be felt most by low-value, high-volume cargo as well as perishables.

How does the crisis impact India’s imports?

Besides the extra time taken on account of the longer route, the developments could make imports costlier and call for better inventory management. While the impact on some critical imports are being assessed, both import and export cycles have elongated, says Mr. Sahai. Also, the crisis could result in final products turning dearer. For instance, the Red Sea crisis could come in the way of any plans to reduce pump prices of petrol and diesel. Gross imports of crude oil and petroleum products as a share of India’s gross imports in value terms was 25.8% in 2022-23, and 22.6% in the first half of the current fiscal. In fact, India’s import dependence (based on consumption) in the April-September 2023 period was 87.6%, according to the government’s Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell. Citing the turbulent situation, Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said there was no plan to slash fuel prices. Separately, in a note on the impact of the crisis on oil tankers, analytics firm Vortexa’s senior freight analyst Ioannis Papadimitriou observes that though freight rates for impacted routes have increased, this has not been reflected in the overall tanker market, implying that there is as yet no *en masse* re-routing taking place. Additional war risk premiums in the Red Sea have been partially contributing to the freight-rate increases for the relevant routes, but this surcharge is significantly lower than the costs linked to re-routing via the Cape of Good Hope. Because of the current pricing dynamics, the tankers that are diverting are predominantly the ones chartered from companies announcing diversions as well as the ones operated by U.S. and Israel-linked entities.

What has been the response?

The UN has said “no cause or grievance” could justify Houthi attacks against freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The U.S. wants more support for the multi-national ‘Operation Prosperity Guardian’ it is spearheading to keep the sea lanes open and free of threats. India is closely watching the situation, and the Commerce Secretary is said to have held discussions with officials and trade bodies.

Why did the Islamic State attack Iran?

What are the roots of the IS’s rivalry against Iran? Why did the IS target a memorial event of slain Iranian General Qassem Soleimani? Why has IS declared war on Iran? What is the Islamic Republic’s medium and long-term strategy to take on the IS?

Stanly Johny

The story so far:
The Islamic State terror group claimed responsibility for Wednesday’s bomb attacks at a memorial event in Kerman for Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian General who was killed by the U.S. in January 2020. Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, an elite wing of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was a sworn enemy of the Islamic State when he was alive. The Kerman bombing, in which at least 84 people were killed and over 200 injured, was the third major attack claimed by the Islamic State (IS) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which shows the growing threat of terrorism Tehran is facing. The attack comes at a time when fears of a regional war, involving Israel and Iran, are on the rise in West Asia.

Why does the IS target Iran?

The IS, which is a Sunni Salafi-Jihadist outfit, sees Iran, a Shia theocracy, as an ideological rival and battlefield enemy. The IS is notorious for its sectarian violence against the Shias, who they call the Rafidha (rejectionists – a derogatory term used by Sunni extremists to refer to the Shias. They say the Shia community has rejected the first three [Sunni] Caliphs of Islam, Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman). For the IS, Shias are not real Muslims – they are apostates who follow shirk (idolatry). In the IS-controlled territories of Iraq and Syria (from 2014 to 2018), Shias faced systemic persecution and violence. Even after the IS lost the territories and shifted the focus of their operations to the lawless lands of eastern Afghanistan, they continued to attack Afghanistan’s Hazara Shia minority.

The IS also sees Iran as a formidable rival in the battlefield as Iran-backed militias played a key role in defeating the jihadists in parts of

The Kerman bombings point to Iran’s growing security vulnerabilities as well as the IS’s expanding capabilities

Syria and predominantly in Iraq. In March 2017, the Wilayat Diyala, the Iraq-based unit of the IS, had released its first propaganda video in Farsi, titled ‘Persia between yesterday and today’, urging Iranian Sunnis to declare allegiance to the ‘Caliphate’ and rise against – and topple – the Iranian regime. Since then, the IS has carried out high-decibel propaganda in Persian. The IS wanted to expand their sphere of operations from Afghanistan to “other nearby lands”, primarily Iran. In three months after the video was released, the IS carried out a coordinated attack on Iran’s Parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, killing at least 17 people. It was a declaration of war by the Islamic State on the Islamic Republic.

How does Iran look at the IS?

Iran sees in the IS a bid to revive the deadly conflict of the early years of Islam between the Sunnis and the Shias. With their anti-Shia propaganda and violence, the IS wants to whip up sectarian passions among hardline Sunnis and trigger a wider war, targeting both Shia communities in Sunni majority countries as well as Iran. It also saw the IS as an immediate security threat. Unsurprisingly, Iran was the first country that rushed aid to Baghdad when the IS started gaining territories in Iraq. In June 2014, immediately after the IS captured Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and surrounding areas, Iran dispatched IRGC units to protect Baghdad and the holy Shia cities of Najaf and Karbala. By December 2014, well before the Western-backed counter-attack against the IS began, Iran had started carrying out air strikes on IS areas in Iraq. Iran’s state organs frequently called the IS a “terrorist organisation” or Taqfiris (those who excommunicate fellow Muslims and mostly use violence against them).

In the medium term, Iran formed a strategy of fighting the IS through Shia mobilisation units. It recruited, trained and dispatched militias to Syria where the regime of Bashar al-Assad was fighting a civil war against a host of rebels and jihadists, including al-Qaeda and the IS. In Iraq, the Shia militias fought alongside the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga militias, under American air cover, against the IS. They played a critical role in defeating the IS’s physical structures and liberating Iraqi cities from the jihadists. The man behind these anti-IS operations was Major General Qassem Soleimani.

Who was Qassem Soleimani?

Soleimani, who was a soldier during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, became commander of the Quds Force, the foreign operational wing of the IRGC, in 1998. Always a defender of the Islamic Revolution, Soleimani was instrumental in shaping Iran’s forward defence doctrine, which

sought to build regional strength through a network of Shia militia groups across West Asia. Iran helped create Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia movement, in the 1980s and it continued to nurture good ties with Iraqi Shia organisations throughout the regime of Saddam Hussein. In recent years, Iran built stronger ties with Yemen’s Shia rebels Houthis, as well as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, Palestinian Sunni militant groups that are fighting Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories.

Soleimani, as the head of the IRGC’s foreign operations wing, left a deep imprint on Iran’s ties with these groups over the years. This relationship came handy for him to stitch together an anti-IS coalition when Iraq and Syria fell into chaos in the 2010s. The U.S. helped the Shia coalition fight the IS in Iraq, but it also accused Soleimani of supporting terrorism, given his close ties with foreign Shia militias. Inside Iran, he enjoyed cult status. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran as well as the commander of Iran’s armed forces, once called him “the living martyr of revolution”. On January 3, 2020, a U.S. air strike in Baghdad, ordered by President Donald Trump, assassinated Soleimani, the primary enemy of the IS. And on the fourth anniversary of his assassination, the IS attacked a memorial event that took place near his *qabar* in Kerman.

What does the attack mean for Iran?

The Islamic Republic has had no dearth of external security challenges. But internally, Iran had remained a fortress for years, barring some separatist challenges. The Kerman bombings, the worst terror attack in the republic’s history, point to Iran’s growing security vulnerabilities as well as the IS’s expanding capabilities. The attack also comes at a time when Iran was under increasing regional pressure with the Israel-Gaza war widening beyond Gaza’s borders. While all Arab countries restrained themselves to diplomacy to address Israel’s indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, which has killed at least 22,000 people in 90 days, Iran-backed groups have attacked Israel and the U.S. positions in solidarity with Palestinians. Hezbollah has been engaging Israeli troops on Lebanon’s southern border in a limited way, while Shia militias in Iraq have repeatedly targeted U.S. forces deployed in Iraq and Syria. Yemen’s Houthis have attacked at least 25 commercial vessels in and around the Bab el-Mandeb Strait turning the Red Sea into a battlefield. Israel and the U.S. have retaliated against these attacks – an IRGC adviser was killed in Syria on December 25 and a top Hamas leader was killed in Lebanon on January 2, both believed to be executed by Israel. On January 4, the U.S. carried out an air strike in Baghdad to kill a Shia militia commander. As the crisis was widening across the region, mounting pressure on Iran, the IS found an opportunity to strike its old enemy. For Iran, the challenge is to tackle both the traditional external security threats and a relatively new yet growing internal security threat at the same time.

Why have truck drivers called for a strike?

What are the sections on hit-and-run in Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita that have irked the sector? What are drivers and transporters demanding? What has been the government’s stand on the protests? Are hit-and-run cases causing many fatalities?

Jagriti Chandra

The story so far:
Truck drivers announced a month-long strike on January 1 to protest against stricter punishment for hit-and-run cases under the new law, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. As drivers of trucks, buses, and oil tankers staged demonstrations and blocked roads at several places across States, including Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, it led to fears of fuel shortage. On the second day of the strike, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) held a meeting with one of the transporters’ bodies, the All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), to defuse the situation.

What is the hit-and-run clause?

Section 106 (1) of the BNS says, “Whoever causes death of any person by doing any rash or

Truckers say the changes in the new law have been brought without consultations with them

negligent act not amounting to culpable homicide, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to five years, and shall also be liable to fine.” And Section 106 (2) states, “Whoever causes death of any person by rash and negligent driving of vehicle not amounting to culpable homicide, and escapes without reporting it to a police officer or a Magistrate soon after the incident, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description of a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.”

Currently, under Section 304A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which will be replaced by the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the punishment for causing death by negligence is two years imprisonment and fine, or both. The BNS also does not provide the relief provided under Section 134 in the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 which lays down the duty of a driver in case of an accident and requires him to secure medical attention for the injured person unless “it is not practicable to do so on account of mob fury or any other reason beyond his control.”

How did the govt. respond to the strike?

On January 2, the MHA held a meeting with the AIMTC, following which Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla appealed to drivers to return to work assuring them that the new law had not been implemented yet, and any decision to invoke Section 106 (2) of the BNS would be taken after consulting the AIMTC. While this helped dampen the protest, truck drivers have distanced themselves from the AIMTC which they say is a transporter’s body and doesn’t represent them. Truck driver’s associations in several States, including the All Punjab Truck Operator’s Union (APTou), continue to hold demonstrations through roadblocks, and have threatened to further intensify their protest in the coming days if the government fails to withdraw the penalties. Truckers have said the changes in the new law have been brought without any consultations

with them. They say that the jail term and fine are too steep for drivers who earn only ₹10,000 to ₹15,000 per month and that the new law fails to provide a detailed accident investigation protocol in the country, in the absence of which drivers of heavy vehicles will continue to be deemed guilty even before an investigation is conducted. President of APTOU, Happy Sandhu, says there is a need for better enforcement of traffic violations such as overloading of trucks and a check on movement of tractor-trolleys on roads which is prohibited, and implementing the permissible working hours laid down under the Motor Transport Workers’ Act, 1961 which caps it at eight hours. He has also called for the need for driving training and provision for insurance for them.

What do road accidents data say about hit-and-run cases?

A total number of 4,61,312 road accidents were reported across the country in the calendar year 2022, claiming 1,68,491 lives. Of these, 56% accidents and 60.5% of fatalities occurred on National and State Highways.

Trucks accounted for 9% of total accident deaths and buses 3.5%. Hit-and-run cases were 18.1% of total accident deaths. Truck drivers are a vulnerable category of road users and easy targets for the police who tend to deem drivers of heavier vehicles guilty, says Chairman of Institute of Road Traffic Education, Rohit Baluja. Therefore, there is a need for police training in not just implementing the IPC (now BNS), but also in how to establish rash and negligent driving with the help of driving regulations such as the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and Motor Vehicles (Driving) Regulations 2017.

He also underlined the need for better use of forensic evidence for violations such as speeding by capturing tyre marks, which is absent. There are many factors beyond the control of drivers of heavy vehicles, such as assigning the left-most lane on roads for buses and trucks which are also used by cyclists and even pedestrians where there are no footpaths.

And finally, there is the issue of driver fatigue which should be addressed by regulating their working hours as well as ensuring that their truck cabins are ergonomic so that they are comfortable and in better control of the vehicle they are driving, Dr. Baluja says.

PROFILES

Autumn of the militants

ULFA

The pro-talks faction of the militant group has signed a peace accord with the Union government which Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has termed ‘historic’, but peace is still afar with another faction vowing to continue the ‘armed struggle’

Rahul Karmakar

A house of entertainment is the unlikeliest of places for an extremist organisation to be born. But then, the two-storey Rang Ghar – one of Asia’s oldest amphitheatres with a roof shaped like an inverted boat – has been more than a heritage structure designed as a high seat for members of the Ahom royalty to watch cultural programmes on an adjoining field. It has been a symbol of Assamese pride since King Pramatta Singha had it built in present-day Sivasagar in 1744. And of peace.

Peace was perhaps far from the minds of six young men who converged at the Rang Ghar on April 7, 1979, to form the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA). Their goal: establish a “sovereign socialist Assam” through an armed struggle. The six were Bhimkanta Buragohain, Rajiv Rajkonwar, alias Arabinda Rajkhowa, Golap Baruah, alias Anup Chetia, Samiran Gogoi, alias, Pradip Gogoi, Bhadreshwar Gohain, and Paresh Baruah.

They had a reason to be agitated. A storm had been brewing in Assam since 1978 over reports that “illegal immigrants” were being enlisted on the State’s electoral rolls. It crossed the tipping point in April 1979 when the Election Commission published the draft electoral rolls for a byelection to the Mangaldoi Lok Sabha constituency. The perceived large-scale enrolment of non-citizens led to an agitation that began in June 1979 and ended with the signing of the Assam Accord in August 1985.

While organisations such as the All Assam Students’ Union spearheaded the six-year agitation for the “detection, disenfranchisement, and deportation” of foreigners, ULFA quietly recruited people with a revolutionary zeal to train them for the fight to rid Assam of “Indian occupational forces”. The outfit divided its members into the political and military wings with Rajkhowa heading the former as its chairman and Paresh Baruah becoming the

‘commander-in-chief’ of the latter. Pradip Gogoi became the vice-chairman and Chetia the general secretary.

Reign of terror

ULFA established contacts with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, which later split into the Isak-Muivah and the Khaplang factions, in 1986. Through the NSCN, it reached out to the Kachin Independence Army of Myanmar for training and arms.

Apart from Myanmar, ULFA began setting up camps in Bangladesh in 1989, the year it formed the Indo-Burma Revolutionary Front with other extremist groups of the Northeast and neighbouring countries for coordinated operations. Initially used as safe havens and training centres, the ULFA camps in Bangladesh became crucial for the shipment of arms.

The third country ULFA targeted for carrying out hit-and-run operations was Bhutan. By the early 1990s, the outfit set up at least 13 camps in southern Bhutan, some shared with the National Democratic Front of Boroland (NDFB) and the Kamtapur Liberation Organisation.

As Assam started recovering slowly from the impact of the anti-foreigner agitation, ULFA struck in May 1990 by killing Surendra Paul, a tea planter and brother of the U.K.-based industrialist Swraj Paul. This triggered a panic and more than 20 tea estate managers fled the State on a chartered flight. A string of subversive activities made the Centre dismiss the Prafulla Kumar Mahanta government and impose President’s Rule on November 28, 1990. ULFA was banned, the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act was imposed in the State, and Operation Bajrang, an Army offensive, was launched.

Counter-insurgency operations led to the arrest of 1,221 ULFA members in the early 1990s but the outfit continued to carry out strikes, a few of them jointly by the now-disbanded NDFB. The reign of terror intensified after a group of ULFA members surrendered in 1992. They became

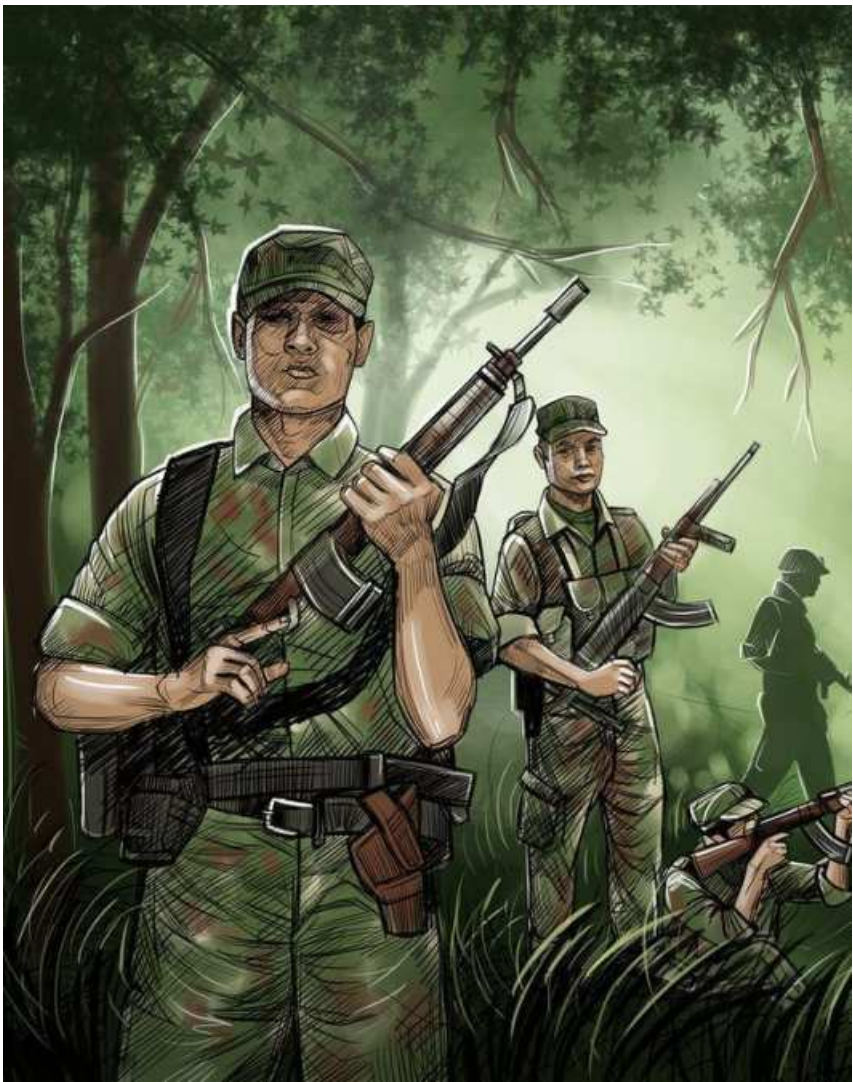


ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

SULFA, or the Surrendered ULFA, who won plum projects and were later (1998-2001) allegedly used by the State forces to help identify and execute ULFA hardliners and members in what came to be known as *guptahoitya* or “secret killings”. Despite setbacks, ULFA continued to be an irritant for the government.

By the turn of the millennium, ULFA began losing public support, particularly after 13 people, including children, were killed in the August 2004 school bombing in eastern Assam’s Dhemaji. Nevertheless, the government kept the talks option open.

ULFA spurned music maestro Bhupen Hazarika’s offer to broker peace but it agreed in 2005 to mediation by an 11-member forum of prominent citizens called the People’s Consultative Group. The initiative fizzled out.

By then, ULFA was a depleted organisation. It suffered a major setback when Bhutan ejected the outfit’s camps in December 2003, leading to the death or arrest of some top leaders while others fled to an accommodative Bangladesh. The return of the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League to power saw Rajkhowa and other ULFA leaders being flushed out

of Bangladesh during 2009-10. Arrested and subsequently released, these ULFA leaders signed a ceasefire agreement with the Centre in September 2011. Paresh Baruah, opposed to the talks, “expelled” Rajkhowa from ULFA in 2012. The latter headed the pro-talks group while the former renamed its hardline faction as ULFA (Independent).

On December 29, 2023, the pro-talks group signed a peace accord that Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma termed “historic” for ensuring “more safeguards” for the indigenous communities than the Assam Accord and the National Register of Citizens, updated in August 2019.

Chasing peace

The Chief Minister said ULFA accord ended 90% of the extremism in Assam with only Paresh Baruah’s ULFA (I) staying out of the peace process. Baruah, operating from the Myanmar-China border, has refused to come to the negotiation table unless the government discusses the issue of Assam’s sovereignty.

Conflict specialists believe there cannot be lasting peace unless the ULFA(I), albeit weakened, gives peace a chance. That the outfit continues to appeal to a section of people in Assam is evident from young men and women joining it now and then. The outfit has also been carrying out low-intensity blasts.

Bhupen Hazarika, who lyrically documented social and political upheavals in Assam, sang *Saraipungor kopou sorai* (Doves of Saraipung, a jungle in eastern Assam where ULFA had its headquarters in 1991) to reflect the general soft corner for the outfit. More than a decade later, as the mindset changed, he sang *Suryodaya jodi lakhya amaar, suryastor piney dhaboman kiyo* (Why are we racing toward sunset if sunrise is what we seek?).

The ‘sunrise’ was an allusion to the rising sun, the symbol of ULFA. With Baruah and his band of 200 fighters playing hard to get, the sun is unlikely to set on ULFA anytime soon.

THE GIST

▼ The United Liberation Front of Asom was founded on April 7, 1979, by six young men who wanted to establish a ‘sovereign socialist Assam’ through an armed struggle

▼ While organisations such as the All Assam Students’ Union spearheaded six years agitation for the “detection, disenfranchisement, and deportation” of foreigners, ULFA quietly recruited people with a revolutionary zeal and trained them for the fight to rid Assam of ‘Indian occupational forces’

▼ By the turn of the millennium, ULFA began losing public support, particularly after 13 people, including children, were killed in the August 2004 school bombing in eastern Assam’s Dhemaji. Nevertheless, the government kept the talks option open

A settler on a mission

Bezalel Smotrich

Israel’s Finance Minister, leader of the far-right Religious Zionist Party, wants Palestinians to be ‘encouraged’ to leave Gaza and fellow Jewish settlers to return to the enclave

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



Arab is a “terrorist”; homosexuality is akin to “bestiality”; the Bible, not capitalism, holds answers to Israel’s prosperity.

Like father like son

Mr. Smotrich was born in 1980 in the settler town of Haspin in the West Bank. In an interview, he traced his ancestry to Ukrainian roots and claimed his grandfather “was a true Palestinian”. One of Mr. Smotrich’s grandmothers survived the Holocaust, the other was born to a family of Zionist leaders.

Rabbi Haim was a leader of the Jewish supremacist Tekumah party, the core of what later became the National Union party (a version was later rebranded to RZP). He guided his son to an Orthodox religious education in yeshiva, a schooling where he learned rabbinic and Torah traditions. Mr. Smotrich served in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) and later obtained a law degree from the Ono Academic College.

Mr. Smotrich grew up in the nationalist religious settlement of Beit El. The settlement, perched atop a hill outside the Palestinian city of Ramallah, is deemed illegal under international law; within the settler community, it rests as an ideological sentinel. Moti Yogev, a former National Union party member and Mr. Smotrich’s colleague, told the *Times of Israel* that from this social milieu and his parents, particularly his father, Junior Smotrich inherited his politics.

Mr. Smotrich first tried, unsuccessfully, for the Knesset in 2009, for the religious hardline National Union party. He was elected to the Knesset in 2015. He rebranded the National Union-Tkuma to the RZP in 2021; ran the 2022 elections with the Otzma Yehudit Party led by Ben-Gvir (the ideological successor of the racist Kach party). The bloc won 14 seats and became members of Mr. Netanyahu’s coalition.

Mr. Smotrich draws support from the settler community movement. A former political colleague of Mr. Smotrich said in a report: “He’s very cunning, he’s conniving, he’s deceptive, but he’s very good at politics.” Mr. Smotrich has supported Mr. Netanyahu’s bid to pass the contentious judicial reform Bill (which puts guardrails on judicial activism) but insists that Mr. Netanyahu still be tried for his corruption charges. His party has accused Mr. Netanyahu’s Likud of attempting to “trample, humiliate and belittle” their ideology.

The conservative leader has packaged the first two consistently, most coherently in a text called the ‘Decisive Plan’, published in 2017 as a vision of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. For Palestinian people, there were three possibilities: they leave the occupied territories, continue to live as second-class citizens, and if they choose to resist, “the Israel Defence Forces will know what to do”.

Mr. Smotrich recently suggested Israel should switch its war tactic with Hamas, less dialogue and more “fire and brimstone”. In the Bible, the phrase represents God’s wrath. Publishing plans that sound like the Endgame and speaking of unfinished jobs, Mr. Smotrich resembles a man on a mission: unleash more fire and violence on the occupied lands.

Forced exit

Claudine Gay

Harvard University’s first Black president, who was attacked by Republicans for allegedly failing to stem anti-Semitism on the campus, resigned after plagiarism allegations surfaced

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



Last week, the Republican Party’s obloquy of the culture in America’s colleges overlapped with an old academic offence, and at the centre of it was social scientist Claudine Gay.

Ms. Gay, who studies race and politics, has been with Harvard University for 17 years. In July 2023, she assumed charge as the university’s new and first Black president. Her tenure also began right after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in higher education, leaving her to negotiate the admission of a diverse student body while following the law.

Ms. Gay is the daughter of Haitian immigrants. She finished schooling at the Phillips Exeter Academy, followed by a year at Princeton University, then Stanford University, and finally Harvard University – all elite institutions.

Trouble began to brew when the House Committee on Education and Labour invited her and her counterparts at the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for a hearing on Capitol Hill on December 5. The committee was chaired by Republican Party representative Virginia Foxx, who lambasted these institutes’ failure, as she alleged, to stem anti-Semi-

tism on their campuses in response to Israel’s war on Hamas. But Ms. Gay simply asserted the university campus is a safe space for non-violent discourse and whose administration acts “when speech crosses into conduct”. Only four days later, UPenn president Elizabeth Magill resigned under pressure – mounting from the war’s early days – from the institute’s alumni and donors. Conservative activists then turned their attention to Ms. Gay.

On December 10, activists Christopher Brunet and Christopher Rufo published allegations that Ms. Gay had plagiarised parts of her Ph.D. thesis, which she had submitted at Harvard University in 1998. Soon after, a conservative publication reported finding plagiarised content in four of Ms. Gay’s papers published between 1993 and 2017.

Ms. Gay did not respond to the allegations. Many of her peers also supported her decision not to take responsibility at first. She later asked the journals

that published these papers to incorporate corrections, but this was poorly received. For example, historian David Bell wrote Ms. Gay was responding as if to “an embarrassing number of typographical errors” rather than plagiarism.

Others were also derided for attempting to cast plagiarism in euphemistic terms such as “duplicative language”.

As the Right demanded that Harvard oust Ms. Gay, the scandal began to echo l’affaire Tessier-Lavigne. Last year, Stanford University’s then president Marc Tessier-Lavigne tendered his resignation after independent researchers found evidence of research misconduct in scientific papers in which he had been listed as a co-author.

Mr. Tessier-Lavigne’s departure was less politically fraught but the idea that even university presidents were not beyond reproach vis-à-vis misconduct lingered. And plagiarism is the sort of misconduct whose wrongness depends as much on the heft and

amount of text copied without attribution as the person who did so.

This is why, while many scholars deemed the first allegations by Mr. Brunet and Mr. Rufo to be mild, the fact that it was Harvard’s president being held responsible caught academics between condemning her for setting a bad example and shielding her from the hateful, racist rhetoric being directed at her.

Gay finally resigned as university president on January 2. *The New York Times* published an article by her the next day. “The campaign against me ... was merely a single skirmish in a broader war to unravel public faith in pillars of American society,” she wrote.

The Right organised a deplorable witch-hunt against Ms. Gay. Yet her response to the allegations sought to downplay them despite the repetitive nature of the alleged offence. Thus ended her brief but eventful term as Harvard University president.

Ms. Gay still holds her ground in characterising the larger forces at play as endangering America’s institutions, but that her peers tried to defend plagiarism to defend her – and that Ms. Gay may have been spared her resignation if she had directly addressed the allegations from the start – has left a sour aftertaste.



REFLECTIONS

{ THE BIG PICTURE }

West needs to wake up to rising religiophobia

Countries such as the US and Canada are sensitive to hate crimes against Abrahamic religions, but ignore anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh propaganda

Another Bay Area temple in California has been defaced — this time Vijay's Sherawali Temple in Hayward. In a similar incident in December 2023, the walls of a Hindu temple in California's Newark city were defaced with anti-India and pro-Khalistan graffiti with the name of Sikh militant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale scrawled across it in large letters. The US authorities treated this as a hate crime. The Hindu American Foundation also dealt with this as an anti-Hindu hate crime "specifically meant to traumatise temple goers and create a fear of violence". The Government of India treated this, and quite rightly, as an act by extremist and separatist forces against India. Interestingly, it did not treat this incident as a hate crime against Hindus, even though it was scrawled on a temple wall.

It was India that first brought up religiophobia by anti-Abrahamic religions at the UN Security Council (UNSC) in October 2021, when the minister of state for external affairs, V Muralidharan, said: "...we are

witnessing how member-States are facing newer forms of religious phobias. While we have condemned anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and Christianophobia, we fail to recognise that there are more virulent forms of religious phobias emerging and taking root, including anti-Hindu, anti-Buddhist and anti-Sikh phobias." He warned presciently that the world ignores this new form of religiophobia only at its own peril. And sure enough, in February 2023, after India left the Security Council, for the first time, phobias against Abrahamic religions were expressly mentioned in a UNSC presidential statement. There was no mention of non-Abrahamic religions. The division of the UN, and the world outside, on religious lines is well on its way.

Attacks against non-Abrahamic religions, including attacks against temples and gurudwaras and forcible conversion of Hindu minorities, are increasingly playing out, especially in our neighbourhood. However, worryingly, these have exponentially increased in the West, especially in the US, Canada, Australia and elsewhere supported by those whipping up separatist agendas against India. The Prime Minister and the external affairs minister have taken these up with their counterparts. While the US is witnessing the rise of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic forces in American college campuses (thanks also to the recent Israel-Hamas conflict), they ignore the anti-Hindu and anti-Sikh propaganda on campuses, which, ironically, targets Indian-American

youngsters. Indian students are labelled as racists and casteists and subjected to undue pressure, while American campuses allow blatantly anti-Hindu activities.

We recently witnessed outrage by US senators and American public figures to the unwillingness of the presidents of three premier universities to condemn anti-Semitism. The US administration also expressed serious concern. But the same US administration, which was quick to condemn anti-Semitism, has maintained a stoic silence on the open threat in the media issued from



TS
Tirumurti

American soil by American-Canadian Khalistani extremist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun against Hindus, temples, Air India flights, Indian Parliament and just about anything in India he can think of. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom is silent on anti-Hindu and anti-Sikh hate crimes. The fight against religiophobia cannot be selective.

Canada has remained a silent spectator in the face of attacks on temples and on Indian diplomatic premises on its soil, mostly by Khalistani radicals and terrorists, citing freedom of expression. But when a 55-foot idol of Hanuman was put up in Canada's Brampton, there were vehement protests that Hinduism was being imposed on Christian-majority Canada. However, the mix in Canada is more potent since three forces have come together — terrorism, Hindu-phobia and separatism. Canada has condoned Hinduphobia (which is affecting its own Hindu minority citizens) and ignored



The mix in Canada is more potent since three forces have come together — terrorism, Hinduphobia and separatism. Canada has condoned Hinduphobia (which is affecting its own Hindu minority citizens) and ignored Khalistanis' separatist agenda in India. REUTERS

the Khalistanis' separatist agenda in India.

In Tamil, we have a proverb: 'One's bad actions will burn oneself'. True enough, Khalistani Hardeep Singh Nijjar is killed on their soil but the Canadian authorities are quick to allege that India killed him. However, in the same breath, they say that open threats by their citizens to kill Indians on Indian soil are "not actionable". The designation of two Canada-based members of the terror outfit Babbar Khalsa International — Lakhbir Landa and Goldy Brar, self-confessed killers of singer Sidhu Moose Wala, as "terrorists" by India is only the latest in India's attempt to combat this menace from Canada over the years.

Fortunately, some are waking up to the danger. The US state of Georgia became the

first US state to acknowledge the rise of Hinduphobia. The Georgia House of Representatives passed a resolution in March 2023 condemning Hinduphobia and anti-Hindu bigotry. More and more Americans are becoming aware that the true target of such hate crimes are their fellow citizens. But not enough is being done. It shouldn't require an Israel-Hamas war to wake Americans up to religiophobia in their society.

As the first country to flag the issue in the UN, it becomes even more important for India to be active in calling out such attacks on non-Abrahamic religions. More importantly, religiophobia, like Islamophobia, should not be allowed to be used to condone terror. India stopped such attempts in the UN by Islamic countries led by Pakistan

when the UN Global Counterterrorism strategy was being finalised.

While it is not India's case to interfere in the exercise of freedom of religion in other countries, it cannot keep quiet when religiophobia against India is encouraged abroad. Being a pluralistic country should not stop us from being vocal about hate crimes against non-Abrahamic religions. Nor should India feel defensive about countering such hate. On the contrary, the more silent India is, the more encouragement these forces receive to question our multi-religious and multi-ethnic fabric.

TS Tirumurti is a former Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations. The views expressed are personal

{ SUNDAY SENTIMENTS }

Karan Thapar



My resolutions of New Year, present and past

The New Year is a favourite time for resolutions although, of course, most of them don't survive very long. They're made with enthusiasm only to be ditched surreptitiously and then laughed away. So, you may wonder why I'm about to suggest a few, as a nation, should adopt. The answer is simple: A resolution is an acknowledgment of what needs to be done even if the commitment to do it lacks resolve. So today let's, at least, take that first step.

First, something our politicians need to act upon. Can they resolve to behave themselves in Parliament? It costs you and me ₹2.5 lakh a minute. We cheerfully accept this expense because we believe question and debate are essential to establish the truth, scrutinise the government's performance and expose inefficiency or corruption. But why should we pay for members of Parliaments (MPs) who

storm the well of the House, shout down speakers or simply fail to attend? During the 16th Lok Sabha, 16% of its scheduled time of 1,615 hours was lost in interruption and adjournments. The cost was ₹39 crore. As our representatives, funded by our money, our MPs owe us fair value and service. All we are asking for is the effective and meaningful functioning of Parliament. This year, let them promise to deliver.

Next, the press — and, perhaps, I mean television news channels in particular. The audience pays to watch and that gives them the right to expect news that matters. No doubt there are several criteria for determining what matters but there are three that, together, finally count: Importance, relevance and balance.

So please, shed your obsession with film stars and cricketers, end your race to break news and, instead, focus on accu-

racy and analysis, and, above all, please don't go on and on. A story has a natural length. Don't stretch it just to fill air time. Remember we're adults. Don't treat us like children. Even if we often respond like that.

And could someone tell our anchors the object of a discussion is not to make people quarrel, even if they're all too ready to squabble. It's to elicit their opinion, hopefully in an intelligent form, and, preferably, in opposition and contrast to others. It's a multiplicity of views that we want, not anchors bludgeoning their guests to agree with them.

Finally, something that all of us need to pledge to do — drive rationally and sensibly. When traffic is snarling up, don't cross to the other side simply to beat the jam. If the light has switched to amber heading towards red, don't shoot across the junction confident of your own luck. Finally, when you park your car, check if you're blocking someone's gate or obstructing the road. At all times there's a simple rule of thumb that should guide how you drive — there are others using the road and they have as much of a right to do so as you do.

Not so long ago, my New Year's resolution used to be a promise to start smoking. As the clock struck midnight I'd light up and spend the rest of the evening sputtering and coughing. It was my personal way of ensuring I did not end up an addicted non-smoker! Of course, by the

SOMETHING THAT ALL OF US NEED TO PLEDGE TO DO — DRIVE RATIONALLY. IF THE TRAFFIC LIGHT HAS SWITCHED TO AMBER HEADING TOWARDS RED, DON'T SHOOT ACROSS THE JUNCTION CONFIDENT OF YOUR OWN LUCK

end of January, when fear of a different addition took precedence, I'd cheerfully give up. But by then the point had been made.

This year I'm taking on a bigger challenge. I've decided to give up interrupting my guests. Instead, I shall let them waffle and drone on, regardless of what they're saying and how off target they may be, till you, the audience, scream in protest. Only when I get the first letter pleading for a return to the old rottweiler style will I resume business as usual.

But what happens if that letter never arrives? The dear postman seems to have misplaced all the Christmas and New Year cards I look forward to. One way or the other, you'll know very soon.

Karan Thapar is the author of *Devil's Advocate: The Untold Story*. The views expressed are personal

When Carnatic music is in the air in Chennai

Yet another edition of Chennai's Carnatic music season has come to an end. The sumptuous feast to the ears is an unparalleled phenomenon that brings music lovers from all over the world to the southern metropolis for three weeks, beginning the first week of December. Chastised for its hot and humid weather for most of the year, the city is cool for about six weeks around this time.

There are more than 10 prominent *sabhas* (associations) that vie with one another for audience and promotion of classical music. The colossus among them is, of course, the Madras Music Academy, which was established in the 1920s. It has an interesting history, punctuated with many controversies. It has neverthe- less stood the test of time, mainly due to its strong leadership and top musicians patronising it.

To be invited to sing at the Academy is an acknowledgment of merit. The system it has built does not allow for any leakage of funds. Several business houses have been incredibly generous with their assistance to the Academy whose main auditorium has world-class acoustics. The only problem is that it does not have sufficient physical space to accommodate the growing number of music lovers who want to become members.

Despite its track record of excellence, there were phases in the Academy's early life that diminished its stature. One school of thought traceable to the 1940s believed the Academy was Brahmin-dominated

and did not encourage Tamil music. This was partly true because, until recently, the emphasis was on compositions that were either in Telugu or Sanskrit. The doyen was Saint Thyagaraja, of course, who composed mainly in Telugu, mostly paying homage to Lord Rama. The two others who dominated the scene were Muthuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Sastri, who too composed verses in Sanskrit or Telugu.

The rebels of the Academy saw a Brahmin bias in the preference for the Carnatic music trinity, as Thyagaraja, Dikshitar and Sastri are collectively referred to. The setting up of a Tamil Isai Sangam (Tamil Music Union) in the 1940s went some way to assuage non-Brahmin sentiments. This also became a constraint because the Sangam, which also holds concerts that coincide with the main festival, frowns upon any musician sing- ing non-Tamil compositions on its plat- form.

Fortunately, the Music Academy has changed its ways over the years and now, stalwarts like Sanjay Subrahmanyam have an excellent repertoire of Tamil compositions. The Academy also offers annual awards that recognise excellence. The highest of them is Sangita Kalanidhi. The announcement of the awards is eagerly awaited by the "rasikas". While there is no visible nepotism or caste bias in this matter, a few awards do occasionally generate a debate, especially because of hawk-eyed critics and sensitive music lovers. There have also been questionable omissions. The music, however, goes on without any



Carnatic vocalist Bombay Jayashree was selected for the Sangita Kalanidhi award in 2023

KAYANVI / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

jarring notes.

What is noteworthy is that a large number of vocalists and instrumentalists, who perform during the season, or the rest of the year, are below 30 years. A good number of them are IT professionals or chartered accountants. Possibly these two vocations allow the luxury of leisure to learn and practise!

The number of those abandoning promising professional careers in the US and Europe to be a part of the Carnatic music milieu in Chennai is increasing. So is the growth of centres of Carnatic music in the US and Europe. Many Hindu temples in America are centres of teaching for young children. As an offshoot, the December season in Chennai now hosts an NRI festival that attracts a lot of children from abroad with an ambition to make it big in the Carnatic music world.

My only regret is that the North-South divide is still huge in the world of Indian music. There is no major exercise to integrate, although the tabla and sitar are quite popular in cities like Chennai. Also,

Carnatic music in northern India is confined to the south Indian community in major cities such as Delhi and Mumbai. Ironically, Mumbai has contributed to Carnatic music: At least three famous vocalists, Bombay Jayashree, Aruna Sairam and sisters, Ranjani and Gayatri (whose *abhangs* are otherworldly), started their careers in the Maharashtra capital.

To sum it up, Carnatic music is drawing recruits from different geographies. I expect it to flourish especially among the youth for decades to come.

An important aid is technology that takes the art beyond the shores of India. The Academy, especially, is so technology savvy that it transmits performances live to other parts of the world. Do not, therefore, despise technology as an unwarranted intrusion into our lives. It is sometimes a blessing beyond words.

RK Raghavan is a former CBI director and a former high commissioner of India to the Republic of Cyprus. The views expressed are personal

Truckers to farmers, the pushback to legislation

On Tuesday evening I was packing in preparation for driving the next day to Lucknow. Gillian and I were planning to attend the wedding of a close friend. Then a journalist friend, also hoping to go to the wedding, rang to tell us to rethink our plan. "The roads are a shambles," he said, "there is a strike by transport drivers." With the new highways, it should not take more than six hours to drive to Lucknow from Delhi. I have just managed the same journey but it has taken us hours because of all the obstacles we had hit with trucks blocking the fast roads and the diversions we had to make.

After a meeting with the Union home secretary, the All India Motor Transport Association (AIMTC) decided to end the nationwide truck drivers' protests against the new hit-and-run law. The government assured members of the transport body that the new laws have not been implemented and will only come into force after consultation with AIMTC. The transport body said that the truck drivers' strike will end soon and all the drivers must resume operations. The nationwide protest led to chaos in several states as people indulged in "panic buying", fearing that stocks would dry up. Many petrol pumps ran out of fuel as people queued up to get supplies amid uncertainty over the drivers' protest. What was particularly strange about this strike was that it didn't appear to be hitting the Capital Delhi.

Coincidentally, in the same day's newspaper, I read a government spokesman saying the rules for the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) would be released before dates for elections were announced. The CAA, introduced by the Narendra Modi government, aims to confer Indian citizenship to persecuted non-Muslim migrants. Notably, the Act will provide citizenship to non-Muslim migrants including Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, and others. The implementation of the CAA, which has been delayed for over four years, necessitates the formulation of its associated rules. On December 27, 2023, Union home minister Amit Shah asserted that the implementation of the CAA can't be halted as it stands as the law of the land. Between April 1, 2021,

and December 31, 2021, 1,414 individuals from non-Muslim minorities were granted Indian citizenship. This Act will give citizenship to everyone from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, who faced problems because of their religion provided they were not Muslims. It was passed four years ago and the date for announcing the rules has been extended several times.

Two years ago, the government went one step further after one year of agitation by farmers and announced that they would be repealing the controversial farmer's laws. The farm Bills were approved by Parliament in September 2020. The laws would have deregulated a system of government-run wholesale markets, allowing farmers to sell directly to food processors. However, farmers feared that this would result in the end of government-guaranteed price floors, thereby reducing the prices they would receive for their crops. This inspired protests against the new laws.

On January 12, 2021, the Supreme Court stayed the implementation of the farm laws and appointed a committee to look into farmer grievances related to the laws. In a televised address on November 19, 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that his government would repeal the laws in the upcoming parliamentary session in December. On December 1, 2021, the laws were formally repealed.

All this uncertainty about legislation concerning a government that prides itself on its decisiveness could be that for all its apparent arrogance, it does overestimate its power. It could also mean that the government does not care about respecting the law and the Constitution. All these incidents represent a breach of the Constitution's spirit if not its letter. It is, of course, possible that the government has simply discovered a way of implementing the law by just delaying things.

If so, then a more vigilant and vigorous media could act as an effective check against this tendency. Unfortunately, this is not the case today as large sections of the media are content to remain passive, even indifferent.

The views expressed are personal



{ SUNDAY LETTERS }

Cautious approach required for AI

This is with reference to 'What the coming age of AI natives portends' by Prabhu Ram (Dec 31). Technology is a double-edged sword. The mistake is we believe we have understood it completely. We need to examine if an AI can create improved weapons leading to more war and crimes.

TS Karthik

Navigating global crises

This is with reference to 'Navigating an uncertain, polycrisis-riven world' by Janmajeya Sinha (Dec 31). It is time for all countries to gather together and implement green strategies and sustainable economic activities in the wake of a growing population and climate crises.

P Senthil Saravana Durai

Presentation matters

This is with reference to 'Is there an Indian way of telling the truth?' by Karan Thapar (Dec 31). Whatever one says, truth or lie, appreciation or criticism, the way you present it matters the most. It is an art.

Abhilasha Gupta

Write to us at: letters@hindustantimes.com

Narratives clash

In the intricacies of global dynamics, 2024 unfolds as a stage for the clash of rival narratives, where established ways of thinking find themselves at the mercy of accumulating contradictions. The echoes of philosopher Thomas Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm shift reverberate through the corridors of power, leaving fields from central banking to technology, industrial policy, and energy in an uneasy state of flux. As we stand at the dawn of the year, the battleground seems vast and varied. Political ideologies engage in a fierce tug-of-war, manifesting in looming elections across democracies worldwide. The stakes are no longer mere policy disputes. They are framed as existential decisions, with leaders questioning the legitimacy of outcomes. The spectre of former US President Donald Trump’s persistent claim of electoral injustice serves as a stark reminder that the struggle for narrative supremacy can transcend the ballot box. The seemingly stable bastions of central banks face their own turmoil. US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell and European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde grapple with uncertainties spawned by an inflationary overshoot. A hasty response to a temporary spike in inflation has laid bare the fragile foundations of monetary policy. Another misstep could thrust central banks into the perilous realm of politics, with potentially severe consequences. The landscape is further complicated by the spectre of higher interest rates, casting doubt on the sustainability of sovereign debt. Political leaders find themselves at a crossroads, forced to re-evaluate commitments on spending and taxation. Yet, this doesn’t herald a retreat into laissez-faire passivity. Bureaucratic intervention in cross-border trade, financial sanctions, merger blockades, and enticing businesses with tax breaks become the tools of the trade. The executive suite becomes a battleground, with companies navigating a labyrinth of government influence.

Amidst this tumult, the advent of self-teaching systems powered by generative artificial intelligence adds a layer of complexity. Clever chat-bots promise productivity gains but also threaten job security. The race for AI supremacy intensifies, triggering a scramble for reliable data, while governments grapple with the daunting task of crafting regulations to curb the spread of dangerous misinformation. It’s a precarious balance, and the younger generation might respond by stepping back from the online realm. The narratives competing for dominance are not only in conflict with established ideas but also with each other. The push for electric vehicles clashes with the quest for reduced dependence on China, illustrating the intricate web of interconnected challenges. Surprisingly, innovations once deemed dead ends, like biofuels, may find renewed relevance in this shifting landscape. As we navigate this complex tapestry, it’s crucial to acknowledge the potential for unexpected events to disrupt even the most compelling paradigms. In the arena of global narratives, 2024 promises a narrative clash of epic proportions. The outcome will shape not only the immediate future but ripple through economies, companies, and markets for years to come. The only certainty in this uncertainty is that the unforeseen will play a pivotal role in the unfolding drama.

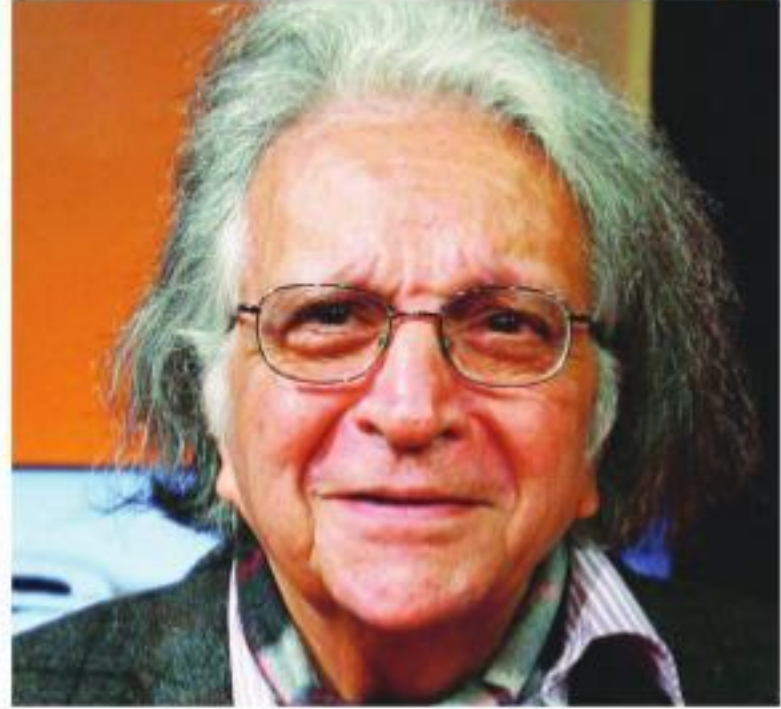
India warming

The year gone by stands as a glaring stitch in the tapestry of climate change, revealing the harsh reality of India’s warming landscape. The India Meteorological Department’s (IMD) recent revelation that the country endured its second-hottest year since 1901 is more than just a statistical data point. It is a visceral reminder of the palpable impact climate patterns can have on our daily lives. The numbers tell a story of relentless ascent ~ a worrying 0.65°C above the long-term average. The broader narrative emerges as a deeply concerning trend. Five of the hottest years in Indian history have unfolded within the last 14 years, underlining a rapid acceleration in warming and an unsettling shift in weather patterns. We’re not merely witnessing climate change. We’re living it. El Niño, that familiar culprit in climate discussions, played a pivotal role in orchestrating the symphony of scorching temperatures across India in 2023. The signature heating of a strip of Pacific Ocean waters led to higher temperatures and reduced rainfall over the Indian subcontinent. As the year unfolded, we saw the consequences unfold ~ from extreme cyclone activity in the north Indian Ocean to heavy rains, floods, landslides, and a sombre toll of human lives. December brought a fleeting reprieve with welcome rains in the southern peninsula, offering a momentary sigh of relief. However, it was a patch of silver in a stormy sky, with the north Indian Ocean witnessing above-average cyclone activity, including three ferocious extremely severe cyclonic storms. Despite the tumultuous weather, monsoon rainfall across the country remained below the long-period average. The sobering statistics reveal more than just rising temperatures and erratic weather patterns. They narrate tales of hardship and loss, with states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, and Sikkim repeatedly grappling with the consequences ~ be it thunderstorms, lightning, floods, or landslides. The toll on human lives is stark, with 1,270 people falling victim to thunderstorms and lightning, 860 to floods, and 160 to heatwaves.

Looking ahead to January 2024, the forecast is nuanced: colder mornings for much of the country, below-normal daytime temperatures in central and north-western regions, and a potential cold wave in central India. The dichotomy deepens as parts of Peninsular and Northeast India are predicted to witness above-normal maximum temperatures. The month may bring dense fog to parts of Northwest and East India, wrapping them in a chilly embrace. Amidst these intricacies of weather patterns, a glimmer of hope emerges. Despite the persistence of “The Boy” till March 2024, a forecast of higher-than-usual rainfall in January, amounting to 118 per cent in the long-term average, offers solace. This surge could prove a lifeline for rabi crops in Northwest India, especially following the region’s 35 per cent shortfall in December. The story of India’s 2023 is a stark reminder that the climate crisis is not a distant future. It’s unfolding on our doorsteps.

Withering Science

Political Science, on the other hand, did not have any immediate national purpose to serve. The burning questions of caste and other forms of social stratification were taken care of by sociologists. Political scientists also lost ground to legal scholars on matters such as human rights, constitutional laws, federalism, and state-civil society. Legal luminaries such as Upendra Baxi and Durga Das Basu became the household names on such matters



It is slightly paradoxical for me, a pupil of Justin Rosenberg, to write about the future of political science. In his 2016 research article International Relations in the Prison of Political Science, Rosenberg had exhorted the students of International Relations to break free from the ‘prison’ i.e., the designation of IR as a sub-field of political science. He wrote, “for IR should be re-grounded in its own disciplinary problematic: the consequences of (societal) multiplicity.”

Rosenberg’s call beckoned to only a few prisoners (myself included). The message barely reached India, or for that matter South Asia. In the United States, I am yet to hear of a department of ‘International Relations’ breaking free from the jail of Political Science. Be that as it may, I will try to focus my discussion on the state of Political Science in India, a country that I know best.

From within the social sciences, India has had the distinction of producing stellar economists (two of whom, Amartya Sen and Abhijit Banerjee, have also won the Nobel award), historians and sociologists. No such name comes to mind whilst one thinks of political science. The question is baffling. It has no readymade answers.

The first Department of Political Science was established at the University of Lucknow, (Uttar Pradesh) in 1922. The first issue of the still continuing Indian Journal of Political Science (IJPS) came out in 1939.

Despite all this, political science, intellectually speaking, remains in an impoverished state. The only political science scholar who had received a modicum of international repute was the legendary professor of Delhi University, Randhir Singh.

His book *Reason, Revolution and Political Theory* (1967) was touted as the best Marxist take down of the conservative

political theorist Michael Oakshott. His last book *Crisis of Socialism: Notes in Defense of a Commitment* (2006) running over 1,000 pages was considered to be a landmark achievement by most political scientists/theorists on the Left.

His death in 2016 garnered an obituary in the London-based newspaper Guardian. After independence, foreign affairs and international relations came under the tutelage of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Big institutions such as the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and the Indian School of International Studies (which was later merged with the Jawaharlal Nehru University) were established by the government.

These attempts were directed to know the world through an Indian lens. Nehru’s participation in the Bandung Conference, his convening of the Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi, the inauguration of the Non-Aligned Movement, India’s diplomatic involvement in the Korean War and the decision to chart an ‘independent, post-imperial foreign policy’ led to an unintended, yet consequential, focus on international relations and area studies.

Political Science, on the other hand, did not have any immediate national purpose to serve. The burning questions of caste and other forms of social stratification were taken care by sociologists.

Political scientists also lost ground to legal scholars on matters such as human rights, constitutional laws, federalism, and state-civil society. Legal luminaries such as Prof. Upendra Baxi and Durga Das Basu be-

came the household names on such matters.

The post-Emergency subaltern studies movement in history further caused a lot of young and bright scholars to gravitate away from political science.

The one area where political scientists tasted both international and national success was the study of secularism.

In the aftermath of the Babri Mosque demolition, Prof. Rajeev Bhargava’s book *Secularism and Its Critics*, (OUP, 1998) became the ‘go-to’ reference to understand Indian secularism. Later on, Achin Vanaik’s book *The Furies of Indian Communalism and its sequel*

Hindutva Rising (Verso and Tulika, India 2017) marked a huge (left-wing) advance on secularism studies.

Another major problem plaguing Indian political science is a lack of theory and method. IR in India commands a Talmudist like adherence of Realism and Neo-realism.

Political Science lacks such a theoretical spine and therefore fails to stand erect. My own experience of studying political science in one the most premier institutions of India, St. Xavier’s College, Calcutta revealed that the course was a medley of subjects ranging from IR, Theory, federalism and Comparative Politics without a theoretical anchorage. Everything was taught to me, yet all seemed to be lost because the syllabi lacked an overarching theoretical coherence. The benefit of hindsight reveals the miasma.

Out of 60 students, only two of us have pursued a career in political science. On the question of method: there was no

module on research methodology at the undergraduate level.

Political Science, like other social sciences, has now become a ticket for a cushy career in the civil services. All the major cities of India have seen a mushrooming of private and money mooching civil services examination preparation centers.

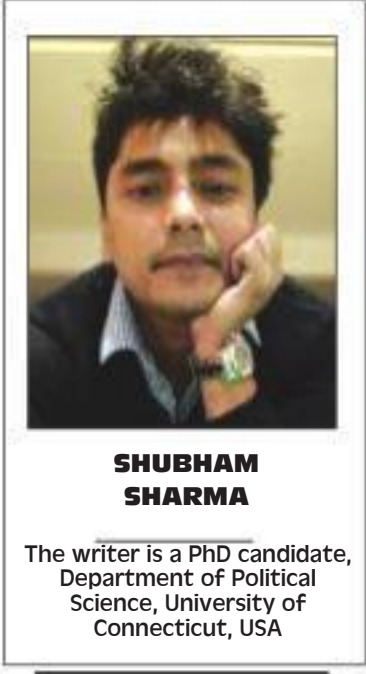
Students with a masters or a doctoral degree in political science are attracted towards these abattoirs of knowledge for quick and easy money.

Since 2014, big business has also focused on the funding of mostly right-wing foreign policy thinks tanks.

The Observer Research Foundation (ORF), currently India’s biggest and richest foreign policy think-tank, had its roots in Dhirubhai Ambani’s (father of India’s richest man Mukesh Ambani) attempt to control the media space through his newspaper *The Observer*. With annual financial inflows over Rs. 35 crore, ORF has become an epistemic behemoth that pales all university IR departments, not to speak of political science, into insignificance.

Far from a critical evaluation of the polity, such centres set-up annual jamborees, such as the Raisina Dialogue, touting India’s ostensible rise. India’s constant slippage on the Global Hunger Index (107th out of 121), and the Press Freedom Index (160th out of 180) are hardly debated or discussed. ORF’s constant fixation with ‘geo-economic’ and ‘geo-political’ aims to depoliticize debate reflects the actual state of affairs within India. It seems that the English lexicon has no other suffix compared to ‘geo’ when it comes to political sanitization of debate.

With the current assaults on India’s polity, it must be the duty of young and aspiring political scientists to take up the gauntlet. If this does not happen, both the discipline and the people of India, are doomed.



SHUBHAM SHARMA
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Welcome

SIR, This refers to today’s report, “Hindenburg case: SC refuses SIT/CBI probe,” in *The Statesman*. The Supreme Court has reposed faith in the market regulator Stock Exchange Board of India (SEBI) by rejecting the demand for a transfer of the Adani-Hindenburg case to the Central

Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

This should be welcomed as any move otherwise would have severely undermined SEBI’s authority and credibility, for no apparent reason.

The court’s refusal to take media reports as evidence is understandable. After all, such external reports should be treated only as information and not evidence to prove a wrongdoing.

The regulator has arguably done what it could do under the powers it has, and an enquiry of this nature, where foreign agencies are involved, is indeed a time-consuming process. In that sense, too, the decision to ask Sebi to wrap up the investigation in an extended deadline of three months is an appropriate one.

But, it is important the findings of the investigations are put



CAMERAS

SIR, Apropos news of truck drivers resisting the newly enacted legal provisions, they have raised a logical question about hit-and-run accident cases.

It is often seen that in a majority of the cases, the truckers are not at fault but rather the two-wheelers, especially in semi-urban and rural areas, are often driven without knowledge of traffic rules and seem in a hurry to overtake other vehicles. With two and even three pillion riders on these two-wheelers, tragedies often occur.

The government may add a compulsory feature for the installation of cameras on both the front and rear of all heavy vehicles along with the DVR.

This will help in recording any untoward incident and identifying the actual culprit thereby saving the innocent person. Many foreign countries have already implemented this feature for safety purposes in their heavy vehicles.

Yours, etc., Dr Navneet Seth, Dhuri (Punjab), 4 January.

out in the public domain, once SEBI concludes its probe.

Such transparent practices are needed as the case has so far played out largely in the public domain, including in the stock markets, and it would be instruc-

tive to know on what basis the regulator arrived at its conclusions. The Adanis themselves would surely welcome such disclosures.

Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru, 4 January.

COP28: The most promising disappointment yet

The active engagement of approximately 85,000 individuals from nearly 200 countries at the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai last month serves as testament to the collective determination to design sustainable climate solutions and establish partnerships to invest in the development of climate-resilient communities. While COP outcomes are often gradual, these multilateral processes play a crucial role in taking steady steps towards the right direction. The latest summit, however, was rife with faulty agreements, postponed resolutions on challenging issues, and committed funding that fell short of the necessary amount required to address the ongoing global warming crisis. At COP27, members had agreed to a Loss and Damage Fund to help the poorer and low-emitting countries who need to deal with the impacts of climate change. The breakthrough topic also tentatively touched upon who should contribute to this fund, albeit vaguely. Potent questions such as where it would sit, who would have power over it, and who would have access to the funding (and who wouldn’t) were also left unanswered.

A transitional committee, however, was created with 14 developing and 10 developed countries, who met regularly in 2023 but found no particular resolution. The final meeting was a hastily arranged affair right before the latest edition of the climate summit, with the two chairs from South Africa

The Daily Star

and Finland presenting the developing countries with a sloppy offer: to take the funding from the World Bank for an interim period. Meanwhile, More than \$792 million was pledged in this year’s convention for loss and damage. While it is heartening to see several countries coming forward to fund the progress of such a reserve, the amount as a whole is inadequate, to say the least. Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, for instance, caused losses of close to \$2 billion. Collectively, such disasters cost billions of dollars per year. Based on historical data, natural hazard events in Bangladesh cost more than \$10 billion in just economic losses between 2000 and 2013.

Additionally, a key agenda for the COP28 agreement was to call for solid planning and implementation of adaptation efforts by 2030. The convention also wanted to see increased adaptation financing—oddly, however, without mentioning any specific goals on adaptation finance.

A sliver of success was seen with the accomplishment of the first Global Stocktake at the climate change conference, despite geopolitical challenges. A crucial mechanism for achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, the Global Stocktake was an opportunity to hold large emitters accountable for climate action. A look at the stocktake reveals that countries still have a long way to go to reach the Paris Agreement goal of containing the global average temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial levels. To achieve that, greenhouse gas emissions would need to go down by a whopping 43 percent by 2030.

Experts argue that more potent Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are required for high-emitting countries and there is a strong need for them to update their long-term strategies. Their policies and instruments must align with the same goal of keeping the world temperature at a minimum, and their policies should foster competition in green technology markets to speed up the transition from fossil fuels.



Important to reclaim space for dialogue

NIRUPAM HAZRA

Politics, particularly democratic politics, is an art of persuasion. It is an arrangement where one needs to win the support of the people to win political power. Today democracy is largely seen as universally desirable form of governance, at least from the perspective of the common people, but it took centuries for such an arrangement to emerge where political power would revolve around ordinary people. When democracy began its journey, it was met with deep suspicion and strong resistance. The resistance inevitably came from those who had traditionally enjoyed power without much accountability. Democracy made the political elites realize that power and political authority would no more remain confined among a privileged few. So, they were expected to oppose it.

However, there were others, especially from the educated and enlightened class, whose interests were not directly hurt by democracy, yet they had been apprehensive and doubtful. The doubts were about how the demos would exercise their new-found political power. The common people at that time were mostly uneducated and lacked, it was believed, the fine judgment required in matters of governance. The power to take major political decisions, so far, was bestowed upon a handful of people who were considered to be worthy and efficient. Democracy opened a floodgate. Anyone with the support of the masses could wield power and take decisions. Democracy, however, in its early days was not as inclusive as it is today. Nevertheless, there had been a sense of anxiety because it was presumed that democracy would eventually be captured by rabble-rousers. A system of mob-rule, as the name suggests, would be mastered only by the demagogues. The fears were not unfounded and democracy, from the very beginning, explored ways to tame megalomaniac demagogues and rabble-rousers.

Transition to democracy brought about fundamental changes - not only in the process of governance but also in the political life of the people in general. It opened a space for dialogue - between the ruler and the



ruled and among common people themselves. Before that ordinary people had hardly any say in political matters, as politics and governance were considered to be the domain of the high and mighty. Democracy by creating a space for dialogue changed the earlier equation. But what remained a cause of concern for many was that the space provided by democracy was equally available to both democrats and demagogues. Similarly, rhetorical power and oratory skill that helped garner popular support in a democracy were equally exploited by democrats and demagogues. A demagogue would try to draw support by whipping up passion, appealing to popular prejudice and by acts of manipulation of public opinion. Reasoned deliberation and informed judgment would find themselves deserted against the emotive incantation of demagogues. So, the question is how to sieve a true democrat out of megalomaniac demagogues.

Democracy has always been vulnerable to the devious designs of demagogues and would-be dictators.

There is no fool-proof mechanism to keep them permanently away. However, certain aspects of their conduct and characteristics may help to spot a demagogue. One such aspect is the way they engage with the people or how they make use of the space for dialogue offered by democracy. The ways of reaching to the people are supposed to vary and it often depends on individual stylistic preferences of a leader. However, demagogues, more often than not, resort to fierce monologues to fire up support, to persuade people; while democrats are more amenable to dialogue. Notwithstanding the fact that dialogue and monologue can be used by both democrats and demagogues, when considered with other traits, a demagogue, as history tells us, shares an unusual penchant for monologue. From the past dictators to the present populist leaders - most of them were great orators and above all, great monologists.

Dialogue, on the other hand, means an exchange of thoughts where the space for disagreement or even dissent remains open and it undergirds the very idea of democracy. Dia-

logue does not necessarily need to take place between people and their leaders; dialogues among people are equally important for a democracy. But a demagogue or an aspiring dictator finds monologue more effective and 'safe' way to engage with people. Monologue comes with certain advantages for one who exercises it. Monologue gives the speaker complete control over the content. The speaker moulds the narrative the way she or he wants - unquestioned and unchallenged. Monologue - however direct or unmediated it may appear - is essentially a one-way traffic. So, the speaker is not directly or immediately answerable to anyone for what is said. Hence, fact and fiction, truth and lies, reality and imagination can be seamlessly stitched together into a singular convenient narrative.

The preferred crowds for a political monologist are also distinct in their nature - they are either credulously enchanted or effectively silenced. Through absolute allegiance or complete silence, a demagogue can emerge as the supreme leader of the people, the final arbiter of truth and

the possessor of panacea for all the problems of the people. So, monologue is the tool through which a demagogue creates a fantasyland, unrestrained by questions, criticisms, disagreements and dissent. But leaders who believe in democratic values always prefer to engage in dialogue, even with their fiercest opponents.

Monologue may mint a saviour out of an unsavoury demagogue; but it takes a toll on democracy. The hypnotizing monologue reveals as much the oratory skill of a demagogue as it paralyses the enchanted listeners' ability to think reasonably. Thus, demagogues' desires expressed through monologues eventually become the voice of the people - people who will always agree with their leader, people who will not allow opposing or dissenting voices to rise, people who will believe only in what they or their leaders believe to be true. These monologues are further amplified when they are served with a dose of disinformation on social media platforms. Such platforms, in the garb of direct communication, allow the demagogues to effectively bypass any method of mediated dialogue. Social media creates virtual islands of citizens separated from each other and reluctant to engage in any form of meaningful dialogue. Its impact is felt in the actual world as well. The mesmerising magic of monologue at times becomes so overpowering that we forget it can be interrupted or questioned. Monologue, therefore, as a mode of communication certainly augurs badly for democracy, especially when we see the rise of such demagogues and their band of followers across the world.

The unwillingness of the demagogues and the incapacity of their followers to engage in dialogue are indications of the attack that democratic instincts face today. If it goes on unabated, dialogue will soon become an improbable option to engage with leaders and fellow citizens. Then every disagreement will be met with threats, trolling, shaming and even physical violence. So, it is necessary that we restore the space for dialogue that any vibrant democracy should have.

(The writer is Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Bankura University.)

NOW AND AGAIN

Winning a Lottery

BUDDHADEV NANDI

Jibanda had a small grocery shop at a point where the main road bifurcated into two narrow lanes. The store was heaped with grocery goods in such a way that Jibanda was perhaps the only person who could move with acrobatic finesse to find the goods in different parts of the shop. Sometimes, he would have to step up a small ladder to reach articles on the shelves below the ceiling. What seemed to me most surprising was that memory was so strong that he would always pull out the right container, even though they looked alike. As it was not an affluent locality, most of his customers would buy goods in small quantities to cater to daily needs. Needless to say, being the only grocer in that crowded area, Jibanda did brisk business. But there was a regular problem that he had to face. A large number of customers had a tendency to buy goods on credit. Even those who had no economic stringency would try to buy on credit with the hope of the shopkeeper forgetting all about it. It was a grueling task for Jibanda to maintain his accounts and deal with such a large number of customers simultaneously. Sometimes he had to get entangled in brawls with the customers to collect dues. Therefore, he put up a cardboard pasted with a white paper with message written in red ink/ It said 'Dhar chahiya lojja deben na' (Don't embarrass me by seeking credit). Though many customers paid heed, some of them adopted new tactics. After receiving the goods, they would declare that the money would be paid later and left the store in haste. One late morning a lottery ticket seller took one rupee's worth of mustard oil. He left a lottery ticket on the counter instead of money. Jibanda had never bought a lottery ticket. He persistently refused to take it. But the obstinate ticket seller left the shop and went away. Unlike today, newspapers that were then the only source of knowing the results of draws, would reach our town after noon. So the sellers could sell their same day tickets the whole morning. Most of the first prizes of lotteries in regular draws were Rs one lakh. More than four decades ago when the price of gold was below Rs 2,000 for 10 gm, Rs one lakh was enough to change the fate of an ordinary middle-class person. After about a couple of hours, the lottery seller turned up to Jibanda's store almost panting. He informed Jibanda that he had won first prize in that day's draw. Jibanda just opened the cash box, took the ticket out and placed it in his pocket.

100 YEARS AGO

JUBBULPORE LIGHTS

To The Editor Of The Statesman

SIR, - Perhaps it is the happy lot of the municipal officials to be owners of motor-cars and that probably is why they have not noticed or felt the grievances of the majority of people in Jubbulpore. The lighting of the streets, I venture to assert, is almost the worst in India, and this coupled with no restriction on the use of powerful headlights on motors blinds and makes dangerous the lot of the majority of the public using horse transportation. May I suggest that one of the officials drive out some dark night. Immediate action would result. It may be well to draw attention to the number of owners of private wheel tax who have the right to demand remedies. It is positively dangerous driving at night in Jubbulpore, and it is hoped that the Municipality will follow the good example of other cities and frame laws for dimming the lights of the motor car in city limits.

TAXPAYER.
Jubbulpore.

MUSHROOMS

To The Editor Of The Statesman

SIR, - With reference to the distinctions pointed out by Mr. J. Halder, in your issue between edible mushrooms and poisonous ones, I beg to point out that these marks of distinction are misleading and not at all reliable. For instance; (a) edible mushrooms (Entoloma microcarpum) growing on the outer surface of ant-hills and on grassy walks between cultivated field, grow in clusters and very seldom in solitude; (b) edible mushrooms (Lepio mastoids) have scales on the outer surface in regular rings; (c) that insects have eaten of a fungus is no test of its edibility, for insect-larvae grow fat on the deadly poisonous one (Amanita muscaria) which is often the cause of accidental deaths in the mofussil during the rainy season. Prolonged boiling in water will have no effect on destroying the poisons of the deadly kinds, the poison of Amanita muscaria being destroyed by prolonged boiling with powerful acids only.

S.R. BOSR.
Carmichael medical college,
Calcutta.

MANIKTOLLAH

To The Editor Of The Statesman

SIR, - I endorse every word about the shortcomings of above municipality and think it disgraceful that such malodorous smells should be allowed to continue. It is perfectly disgusting to walk anywhere on the roads. What with night soil carts, bloated carcasses in carts, old bones in bags in carts, stinking drains due to the free passage of water being prevented by low culverts, causing the water to remain stagnating with an ever accumulating scum of filth, horse stables with open, stinking and festering drains, all the foregoing being first class breeding places for mosquitoes, it is impossible to live within the Maniktollah municipal limits.

PRO BONO PUBLICO.
Calcutta.

POLITICAL DIARY KALYANI SHANKAR

What BJP must do in South India

Can Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity help the BJP win more seats in southern India? The Party requires more support in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh, where it faces hostility. Kerala is ruled by Congress or Left-led fronts, while Tamil Nadu alternates between the D.M.K. and A.I.A.D.M.K. In Karnataka, J.D. (S), Congress, and BJP have taken turns in power.

The primary factors that impact voters in South India are caste, money power, ideology, cinema, and liquor. In Tamil Nadu, influential political figures such as M. Karunanidhi, MGR, and Jayalalithaa have had a significant impact. In united Andhra Pradesh, NT Rama Rao played a crucial role. But the BJP lacks prominent leaders in the southern states.

The BJP is trying to increase its seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Recently, Prime Minister Modi launched the campaign for the 2024 elections in the southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Lakshadweep. The inauguration of several large projects accompanied this. The BJP is utilizing its resources and orga-

nizational strength, and around 40 central ministers are assessing the situation to achieve the party's objectives.

The BJP 29 out of 130 seats in the southern region in 2019. This was made up of 25 seats in Karnataka and four seats in Telangana. However, they lost Karnataka to the Congress in last year's Assembly polls. The AIADMK was an essential ally of the BJP in the South, but they ended their alliance three months ago. Since then, neither party has tried to reconcile.

The southern states have unique cultural identities. Kerala has a strong presence of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), while the Y.S.R.C.P. currently governs Andhra Pradesh. In the recent Assembly elections, the Congress emerged victorious in Telangana. In contrast, although the BJP had support in Karnataka, the Congress defeated it. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian Parties oppose the use of Hindi and are atheistic.

The gap between North and South India is increasing. Prime Minister Modi is attempting to change the perception that the BJP party is not aligned with the culture of south



India. The BJP focuses on 84 out of the 130 seats in south India and mainly concentrates on managing their cam-

paign booths.

Despite following a specific strategy for the South, the BJP must still convince people in the region that their needs will be adequately addressed.

Many people in south India have a grouse about the delimitation of constituencies, as the Centre uses population as a yardstick. The southern states have managed population control far better than those in the north, and such their population as a share of the total has shrunk. Now they believe they are being punished for following the government's instructions on population control.

One way to address the delimitation issue is to modify the composition of the Rajya Sabha, inspired by the U.S. Senate's practice of ensuring equal representation of all states. However, this proposal may face opposition from larger states.

Regional parties like the DMK, AIADMK, TDP, and TRS hold significant positions in regional politics, where caste plays a vital role. In Tamil Nadu, specific communities such as Vanniyars, Thevars, and Gounders have influential roles. In Karnataka,

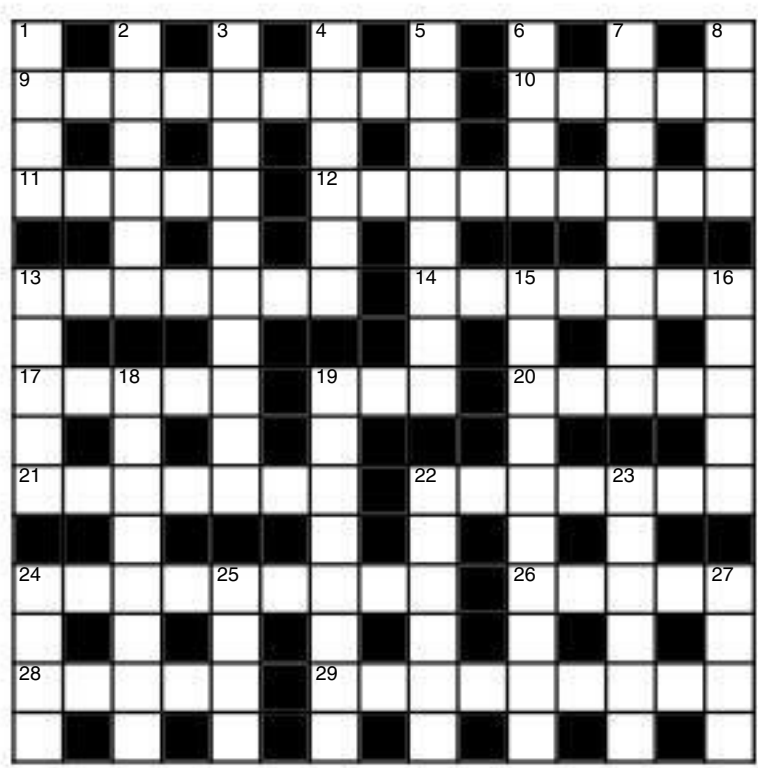
Vokkaligas and Lingayats are considered influential communities. In Andhra Pradesh, the Reddys and Kammals have been engaged in a long-standing rivalry. The Kapus are trying to establish their political presence, while the once-dominant Brahmins have lost their influence. In Kerala, political alliances are formed between Communists and anti-Communists. In Telangana, the Reddys hold senior positions and dominate all political parties.

Religion is not a significant political issue in South India. The BJP's stance against Christian conversions or a perceived hostility towards Islam has not had any impact on the region.

The BJP needs to adopt each state's cultural norms and political strategies to win over its voters. The party must seek alliances and regain the support of its former partners. Therefore, the party must reassess its election strategy and develop a new narrative. If it fails to do so, the opposition coalition I.N.D.I.A., which has already established a foothold in the South, will become stronger and pose a significant threat to the BJP's prospects in the region.

CROSSWORD

NO-292657



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

ICEPICKS FISHER
AURELPL
AMEN ELABORATED
PCE WDEM
MISTAKEN EYELET
OTERIN
ANALYSIS BLUNT
TUTEN
BROWN INDIRECT
T PEN ESH
GRETNAGAMESMAN
EHR OTTR
STERILISER FELL
TUOOSUE
HAMMER NEEDLESS

Across

- 9 Hard one to crack so ran it past expert (9)
10 See 3 Down
11 Composer showing ignorance? (5)
12 Universal god is deceived in sacred book (9)
13 Plant a big one criminally (7)
14 Clever remark very good spread round about (7)
17 Excuse excellent that secures freedom (5)
19 Stole pig with rook making escape (5)

- 20 Tory Party provides apartment across the pond (5)
21 Wizard stops old man being harmed (7)
22 Was the joint tenant? (3,4)
24 Colleague in Germany happened to have short skirts (9)
26 Mountainous region in northeast China (5)
28 See 15 Down
29 Page in Old English helping process (9)

Down

- 1 Hour to feed young bear fish (4)

- 2 When in Golf covering kilometres is demanding (6)
3/10 Yes-man in the majority in Congress? (10,5)
4 Copper in vain tortured South American native (6)
5 Kooky American avoiding press and public (2,6)
6 British boxer comes to an island (4)
7 Say Bach's instrument managed to capture hearts (8)
8 Breeding centre built at last in French south (4)
13 Resolutely oppose woman with gay man (5)
15/28 Scene and dubious claim

- about us — it creates mood (10,5)
16 Runs from bad-tempered elk (5)
18 Say Mussorgsky introducing himself is shameless (8)
19 Evil family shows animosity (3,5)
22 Where Darwin lived and died, being drunk (6)
23 Compiler's two ducks causing damage (6)
24 Impact one expects to have? (4)
25 Get less following cut (4)
27 Solo from girl on euphonium (4)

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

Feb budget may have rhetoric, but not sops

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR



Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman will present an interim budget for 2023-24 on February 1. The full budget will be presented after the elections, in July. Do not expect fireworks in the interim budget. Finance ministers have been known to slip minor concessions into them but mostly they have kept their ammunition dry, reserving it for the full budget in July.

An interim budget is supposed to be the most boring of budgets, providing little more than a provisional statement of anticipated revenue and spending in 2023-24. It is not supposed to have tax changes that can influence voters. Yet promises can be made about the future if the party is re-elected. The general election is due in May, and every little government promise will attract attention. The interim budget will be a major media event, regardless of predictions of being boring.

In no country is the budget as huge a media event as in India. Before economic liberalisation in 1991, Indian budgets captured a limited audience on budget day, followed by a few clarifications and discussions the next day. That was all. But when Manmohan Singh presented his first budget in 1991, it was more than just a budget: it was an occasion for announcing major economic reforms and changing the entire path of the licence-permit raj that had hitherto prevailed.

All opposition parties, especially the leftists, claimed that India was succumbing to neo-colonialism by accepting the stringent condition laid down by the International Monetary Fund for its rescue loan. They contemptuously rejected the notion that reform was good for India. Every successive Manmohan Singh budget contained further reform proposals, which were met with similar furious castigation by the Opposition. Narasimha Rao ran a minority government that was always in danger of being toppled, so the budget had possible political consequences too. No wonder every budget attracted more eyeballs.

This was accompanied by the rise of private TV channels. They needed to increase their viewer base as fast as possible, and found that the budget could be talked up as a huge game-changer to be discussed sector by sector in search of new reforms. Excitement mounted in the month before the budget and subsequent weeks. The fact that no party had an absolute majority for two decades after 1991 meant that governments were never entirely safe. The combination of reforms and political excitement



NOTHING TAXING: Nirmala Sitharaman might make some small tweaks but will probably reserve the big-ticket announcements for after the elections

helped promote the budget as a must-see event.

This was buttressed by the rise of business TV channels that tracked every move of the stock markets. The tiniest political statements could move the market up or down. A rising middle class was increasingly investing in the stock market, and so watched every prediction and listened to every rumour. Mere speculation on policy changes could move share prices up and down by large amounts.

In this manner, the budget gained ever-rising viewership and accompanying advertisements. So, they had every incentive to find new angles and audiences.

Economic journalists found themselves in high demand. On one occasion, a journalist signed a contract with a TV channel for appearing for four days before the budget, on budget day, and again for two days after. The channel anchor was even asked about why there was a need for post-budget discussions on two more days when everything had already been discussed threadbare? The anchor laughed and said he agreed, but the channel had already received so many advertisements for the two post-budget days that they had to come up with some matching content!

Will this interim budget really be a bore? After all, this is an election year. But the BJP is so certain of winning that it has no need to look to the interim budget for votes. Sitharaman will doubtless talk of new schemes and higher welfare allocations for every possible section of voters. Like her predecessor in 2019, Piyush Goyal, she might tweak the income-tax rebates without changing the overall tax structure. Another predecessor, Jaswant Singh in 2004, announced excise duty cuts for items of common consumption on January 8, well before the budget and so skirted the prohibitions of an interim budget. This is no longer possible — excise duty has been amalgamated in the General Goods and Services tax.

I suspect Sitharaman will be high on rhetoric about the Modi government's achievements but not on tax sops. Narendra Modi has always believed that elections are won by performance, not freebies. The finance minister is likely to be guided by that approach. ■

Forgotten courtesan's story was fascinating for its authenticity and sheer universality

Drawn by the real-life story of courtesan-singer Janki Bai Ilahabaadi, aka chhapan churiwali (the lady with 56 cuts), Neelum Saran Gour spun the tale that recently won her the Sahitya Akademi award. In an interview with Shruti Sonal, the former literature professor and author talks about why the courtesan has become a subject for feminist re-examination

■ Congrats on your award. As 'Requiem in Raga Janki' came out some years ago, did you feel this was a belated recognition?

I really am not sure what recognition means but if it signifies wide readership and rave reviews, then 'Requiem' definitely got it as soon as it released. It won the 2018 Hindu Fiction Prize, received several offers from filmmakers and theatre persons, besides plenty of interest in literary festivals and circles. The Sahitya Akademi Award, however, being India's highest official recognition of a literary work, came as the culmination of the book's fruitful journey.

■ Your work of historical fiction is based on the life of a girl who is sold into a kotha, and becomes one of the country's first recording artists. Why did you pick this story of a forgotten courtesan?

Janki's story attracted me for its existential authenticity and also for its sheer universality, its conflict between the outer and inner life of the artist. Also, I have always had this deep affinity with the world of Hindustani classical music and the rich lore associated with it, which needed to be written down before it vanishes. Janki is one of Allahabad's almost forgotten personalities, so this fictional biography is part of my city's lost lineage.

■ There's a renewed push to throw light on the lives of nautch girls and courtesans through movies, books and theatre. How do you see their contributions?

The courtesan has always been a figure that has attracted literary interest, particularly in our Indian language and in themes based on the late 19th and early 20th century milieu. But in Indian writing in English, the courtesan as subject is a

fairly recent arrival. This is partly the result of an awareness of the courtesan's tremendous potential as a subject for feminist re-examination — as women-keepers of traditional secular music, preservers of rich, syncretic styles, figures of creativity and civility and also possessors of moving personal histories. While the ancestral gharanas or schools of music centred around a male maestro or grand master of the style, the kothas were sites of female expertise, even though the resident teacher and accompanists were males. This is one reason that I can think of why the subject has acquired a certain popularity. For my part, it was Janki's life and personality that drew me.

■ What was the process of researching the music scene you describe so beautifully?

My father was deeply into Hindustani classical music, and I grew up with music and with lore. I used a lot of it while writing 'Requiem'. I also explored narratives tucked away in old journals of music in the Indian languages, retrieving details that went to give body and nuance to the writing. As to biographical details about Janki, there was precious little to be accessed. Only two copies of her collection of verses survive, of which I was fortunate to acquire one. There was a carefully researched article in the Hindi magazine 'Dharmayug', and a short Doordarshan film on her. I went through archival lists of the gramophone records of the period. I also studied parallel areas like the personality and poetry of Akbar Ilahabadi, the Delhi Durbar, the national movement as it was unfolding in Allahabad — things like that. I used my



Three cheers for wine and dine. Now, three ideas to make GIFT city shine

THE UNDERAGE OPTIMIST

CHETAN BHAGAT



GIFT City (Gujarat International Finance Tec-City) recently allowed liquor consumption on its premises. There was some opposition to the move, given Gujarat's existing no-liquor policy.

However, government insisted (rightly so) that to make GIFT City a global financial centre, it needs to offer global business leaders and talent a lifestyle similar to other leading financial and business cities of the world.

This piece is neither about alcohol politics, nor is it endorsing consumption of alcohol. Quite the contrary. I believe there is mounting scientific evidence about the ill effects of alcohol on one's health. These include poor quality sleep, lower

immunity, brain damage, obesity, liver problems, possibility of abuse and addiction, to name a few. Alcohol, wherever possible, is to be avoided.

Yet, the move to allow it in GIFT City is welcome and necessary for it to reach its stated aim of becoming a leading global financial centre.

GIFT City, for the uninitiated, is a 16-sq-km area demarcated near Gandhinagar in Gujarat for the purposes of aiding business, in particular finance, trading exchanges and other services. The city was announced in 2007, and has made moderate progress in the last 15 years. It is finally gaining traction with leading global banks and tech companies such as Google setting up centers in the last couple of years. It has a demarcated Special Economic Zone (SEZ) where companies get various tax incentives. To support the companies present, there are also other allied industries such as residential property, education, hospitality and medical services.

It is an excellent idea as it is much better if we create our own SEZs rather than have India focused companies based in Dubai, Singapore or Hong Kong. Of course, making SEZs within an existing nation is not easy. Such regions require their own rules and laws, particularly in areas related to business and commerce. Since any such city will be located on Indian territory, special laws would require major national legislation and political will. However, given the political stability we have now, and the work already done in GIFT, there is a great opportunity to take the SEZ to the next level.

Will the availability of alcohol help? Surely it will. This isn't just being able to have a glass of beer, but the signal it sends out to potential investors. That India is open for business, willing to change, even if that means taking tough decisions. Helping GIFT reach its full potential will require a few more bold steps. If taken, these will truly make it a world-class

international destination, located within India. Here are the top three ideas:

1. Separate GIFT business and tax laws, with separate courts: The actual legislation required at the national level to do this will be intense, but it will set the stage for other GIFTs. Investors around the world place a huge premium on a functional, clear, precise legal system to do business. GIFT will need this to invite more investors.

2. A domestic immigration of sorts: GIFT city residents would have separate IDs, and one would need one to live there. Some of this is already planned given that the liquor permits will only be for GIFT city residents. However, clear GIFT residency will allow other benefits as well. Different tax laws can apply to not only companies in GIFT, but also to people living there. This will incentivise people to move there. For instance, we can have GIFT residents qualify for an NRI type, or a modified NRI-type status.

3. Building a world-class city with a quality of life: A great city is not just a place that allows you to make money. It is also a fun place to live. And fun isn't just about going out drinking in bars. Parks, running tracks, cycling tracks, sports areas (for the public, not just for competitions), performing arts spaces, children's activities, senior citizens' activities — all this can make a new city truly come alive and living there a great experience. Clean streets and good water matter too. Tax incentives and beer bottles only go so far. A full focus on quality of life is what will make GIFT truly shine. Ideally, this should be the case in every Indian city.

GIFT seemed like a far-fetched idea 15 years ago. However, given where India is right now, it looks like we are at a special inflection point. With some more reforms and efforts, GIFT can indeed be taken to the next level, and maybe its success will be a template for other cities. ■

Indo-French relationship: When commerce meets romance

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

SHOBHAA DE



Bon chance! What luck!! Everything française is falling neatly into place. The timing for an 80-page comprehensive cover story on India in 'Le Point', France's leading political, conservative weekly, is absolutely on point. It is the first prestigious European publication to hail India as a superpower, and that is something, bien sur!

It is the stamp of approval that seals the current Hindi-Frenchie bhai-bhai alliance, just before President Emmanuel Macron arrives as chief guest at India's 75th Republic Day parade. Never mind, that US President Joe Biden couldn't make it — we won't go into reasons behind his absence. In any case, Macron is far cuter, and at 46, he is unlikely to make the kind of faux pas that the 81-year-old often makes. Besides, this year also marks the 25th anniversary of the India-France Strategic Partnership (a recent big-ticket defence deal involves 26 new Rafale marine fighter jets and three Scorpene class submarines). France is the second biggest arms supplier to India. Since 1998, India and France have engaged in a torrid relationship that covers nuclear energy and space. There's no scope for a menage a trois since both partners are completely compatible and unlikely to stray.

India was sardonically and snarkily referred to as France's "new best friend" in 2019 by a snotty researcher. Turns out, he was bang on. Look at the finely tuned understanding of what is needed to take the relationship to the next level. It's time to put a ring on it, and settle down. This is one marriage that looks like it will last, given how the countries share a belief in the concept of strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. France also backs India's bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Friends with 'benefits' often turn into dependable and loyal partners. Last July, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was guest of honour at the Bastille Day parade, and President Macron came a-calling in September for the G-20 Summit. Modi was honoured with Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour, the highest award of France. Incidentally, Amitabh Bachchan was similarly honoured with the Officier de la Legion d'Honneur in 2007. Historically, ties

between the two countries go back hundreds of years. Maharaja Ranjit Singh had more than 2,000 French soldiers in his military, and several became generals. Significantly, Ranjit Singh's bust in Saint-Tropez is quite a tourist attraction.

There is also a more troubling history. From the 17th century and all the way till 1954, France had a colonial presence in India. Pockets of Puducherry are still dotted with trendy cafes and boutique hotels, which remain more French than desi, with some residents preferring to converse in the language of their forefathers.

The two countries have agreed on a 'Horizon 2047' roadmap that will mark 100 years of India's Independence and 50 years of the strategic partnership. Ambitious plans are afoot to further consolidate the alliance in political and cultural contexts with "63 outcomes" outlined in July 2023 by foreign secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra, and divided into multiple pillars, with the foremost pillar being a partnership for security and sovereignty. "The strategic partnership is anchored on... belief in a multipolar world shaped by reformed and effective multilateralism," reads a statement. Which is music to many Indian ears at a time of shifting power dynamics.

PM Modi had gifted an exquisite silk Pochampally ikat saree to France's First Lady Brigitte Macron. If she does accompany her husband to the grand Republic Day parade, the biggest global fashion statement could be made by Madame Macron if she dresses in the traditional six yards. "India has always been our priority," declared the French President in 2018, as he and the First Lady managed quick trips to see the Taj Mahal. "Our two great democracies have a historic relationship," he stated during the four-day visit. Ask Bengalis who consider themselves the French of India, and frequently point to shared cultural affinities and an exaggerated pride in their respective cuisines as proof of this special connection. Indo-French l'amitie (friendship) has never been this intense. 'C'est si bon' (It's all good), as the old Dean Martin song goes. Well, here's raising a glass of perfectly chilled bubbly, as the two countries sign many more juicy deals and show the doubters what's possible when commerce meets romance.

Do enjoy a buttery, flakey croissant avec un café (cup of coffee). It's officially la vie en rose (life in happy hues). Santé! ■

INBOX

Kharge a good bet to counter BJP narrative

This refers to the column 'Kharge googly...' (ATM, Dec 24). Kharge comes with a clear ideological foundation, combining Nehruvian and Ambedkarite politics. If communicated properly, this could be a good counter to BJP's Hindutva. The friction, however, does underline the competing interests that the INDIA alliance will have to paper over, particularly on difficult questions like leadership, and seat-sharing in states where the members have traditionally been pitted against the other.

— Dipankar Guha, Delhi

Youth outreach needed

Apropos of the column 'Kharge googly...' (ATM, Dec 24), for INDIA bloc to perform well next year, Kharge needs to be more visible. Rahul Gandhi must step down and allow him to take center stage as a majority of the youth does not know much about him. In addition, to secure a future INC must focus on the younger generation or the "to-be" voters. This requires getting on social media platforms like Instagram too.

— Jashan Garg, Hisar

Pride and prejudice

With reference to the column 'Romance gone sour...' (ATM, Dec 24), the author has rightly highlighted the prejudiced lens through which women who speak out about abuse at the hands of their affluent partners are seen. No matter how well off the woman might be, she is seen as an ornament in the man's already sparkling armour. This mindset has to be done away with.

— S A Padmarajan, Mumbai

Email your letters to the editor at sunday.times@timesgroup.com with 'Sunday Mailbox' in the subject line. Please mention your name and city

Baloch march shows Pakistan has not learnt lessons from 1971

BY INVITATION

TILAK DEVASHER



In the season of electoral politics that is slowly engulfing Pakistan, Islamabad is witnessing a different kind of activity — a protest march led by Baloch women who have travelled over 2,000 km from Turbat on the Makran coast in Balochistan to make themselves heard. The march, under the banner of the Baloch Yakjehti Council (BYC) and led by the fearless and determined Dr Mahrang Baloch, is a protest against enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings that are rampant in the province. It is a poignant cry to draw attention to their plight, and a desperate hope that their missing relatives are still alive.

The protest started in Turbat on December 6 after the extra-judicial killing of a Baloch youth by the security forces. Following a two-week protest, the sit-in was relocated to Quetta. Getting no satisfaction there, the protesters decided to march to Islamabad. Here they were initially refused entry and subjected to tear gas, water cannons, beatings, intimidation and arrests instead of being allowed to go to a peaceful protest camp at the National Press Club. At one stage, the authorities even planned to 'deport' the protesters, portrayed as terrorist sympathisers, back to Quetta. This was, however, prevented by the courts which told the authorities not to forcibly evict them.

So what makes this one different from the similar marches in the past, one of which in 2014 was led by Baloch activist 70-plus Mama Qadeer? For one thing, this march has had a greater resonance in Balochistan with massive crowds greeting the marchers in several towns through which they passed. Solidarity protests and marches have also been carried out in different parts of Balochistan, and even in Karachi. For another, the march also gained considerable traction in south Punjab, especially Dera Ghazi Khan and Taunsa Sharief where many Baloch live. It also resonated with the Pashtuns. In Dera Ismail Khan, parents of the incarcerated Manzoor Pashteen, leader of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), welcomed them and presented a Mazar cap and shawl to Dr Mahrang Baloch. Unity of the Baloch and Pashtuns would be a nightmare scenario for the Pakistan state.

Above all, the march has caught the imagination of the international community due to the leadership and participation of a large number of women of all ages. They have broken the traditional shackles of a conservative society to seek justice against state repression, abductions and extra-judicial killings of their fathers, brothers and sons.

The tribal sardars, who are the visible face of Balochistan in Islamabad and Quetta and often seen rubbing shoulders with the political elite of other provinces in parliament, are conspicuous by their absence in the protests. Mainstream political leaders of Pakistan such as Maryam Nawaz Sharif, who had at one time put on a Baloch dress and hugged a Baloch girl whose father was



LOUDER VOICE: The march led by women has drawn global attention to the issue of extra-judicial killings

missing, and Bilawal Bhutto have been absent too. Even the nationalist parties of Balochistan have stayed away.

Despite this, the Baloch protests are gradually gathering international attention. British Labour MP John McDonnell tabled an early day motion in parliament calling for the support of women leading the march. Climate activist Greta Thunberg also voiced solidarity. European Union ambassador to Pakistan Riina Kionka expressed "deep" concerns over reports of mistreatment of Baloch protesters in Islamabad. Mohammed Hanif, the celebrated British-Pakistani author of the best-selling 'A Crate of Exploding Mangoes', returned Sitara-i-Imtiaz, the third highest civil award in Pakistan, as a protest against a state that "continues to abduct and torture Baloch citizens".

The frustration of the protestors was perhaps best articulated by Sammi Deen Baloch, another leader of the march who was quoted in Dawn saying: 'Each time I come to Islamabad, my sorrows seem to intensify... I feel increasingly isolated and abandoned — as if I am an alien, a terrorist, or an immigrant in my own country.'

What Pakistani rulers don't seem to realise is that there are still some Balochistan youth who believe their problems can be resolved politically by Islamabad. Given the negative attitude, the ordinary Baloch are being pushed to the wall and they see no future when even raising their voices is unacceptable to the state. How long will it be before disappointment and despair turns into hostility? A comparison with the situation in the then East Pakistan is inescapable. It was the oppression and exploitation of Bengalis that increased their alienation and resulted in the eventual creation of Bangladesh. Like the Bengalis, the Baloch today are marginalized politically and shoved to the fringes in the imagination and policies of the ruling Punjabi elite. They are as much second-class citizens in the Punjabi-dominated system as were the Bengalis. Pakistan has clearly not learnt lessons from 1971. ■

Tilak Devasher is the author of 'Pakistan: The Balochistan Conundrum' and member, National Security Advisory Board. Views are personal

Deepan Sivaraman's 'The Legend of Khasak' was performed in a massive field at Thrikkaripur in Kerala.



Some recent plays have explored the endless ways in which space can be transformed, articulated and animated

Space matters

The venue of Amitesh Grover's 'The Money Opera', presented by Serendipity Arts Foundation, was a dilapidated building in Delhi's Okhla. PHOTO: RADHIKA AGARWAL



NEELAM MANSINGH CHOWDHRY

SPACE is both tangible and atmospheric. The famous quote, 'You could cut the atmosphere with a knife,' is self-explanatory. It could be a furniture-laden space, a meditative space, an art gallery, a black box, a proscenium stage, a hall with lots of windows or no windows, or an empty space.

Spaces are not unfilled or unfulfilled vessels. They contain myriad memories and longings. Each space asserts its presence that you decode, unravel and understand. Happy space, sad space, celebratory space, so on and so forth. Imagine an empty space in your mind's eye, which may need to be melded, changed, rearranged or sometimes even junked. It depends on the memories that are packaged within the space. Is space the catalyst to determine equations? A challenge for fresh memories to be rewritten? A remembering, a forgetting?

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, "Imagination is the only weapon in the war with reality."

Does this all sound too abstract? Then let me explain with a short story.

I was invited to conduct a masterclass at a drama school and found myself placed on a podium, 3 feet above the ground. The students were seated in semi-darkness, while I was flooded in spotlight. I started my

speech with a certain degree of enthusiasm and slowly started feeling disembodied, unconnected, ghostly. I could not see the students clearly, could not decipher their response, reactions! No energy flowed, leading to a complete absence of exchange. My class faded into nothingness, and I felt myself dissipating into an amorphous blob, bewildered by the unexpectedness of it all.

A few days later, a similar opportunity presented itself, and I insisted on seeing the visuals of the space in which the talk was being held. A narrow sunlit space was identified; not perfect, but with the possibility of connections being made. During the process of the talk, I could feel the current of shared ideas and thoughts, and the question-and-answer session flowed. The relationship between me and the receiver was real and palpable.

Space matters, in theatre, and in life. The challenge is to explore the endless ways in which it can be transformed, articulated and animated.

Auditoriums are the pride of any city. Most corporations and governmental agencies envision them as huge spaces for multiple usages. A theatre performance, a pop concert, a seminar, or an AGM meeting, are envisaged during construction, unmindful of the fact that these activities are as different as chalk and cheese. The focus is on sumptuous push-back chairs, silent air-conditioning, lush velvet curtains, accoutrements that are necessary but not mandatory. Most artistes/performers desire something intimate, personalised. Plays have been performed on rooftops, viewed through keyholes, and in abandoned buildings. For an explosion of life to happen, perfect thousand-seaters, with glossy curtains and flies, lights and colour projectors are not the criterion. The most exciting works that I have seen have played out in burnt-down buildings and street corners, in taverns and warehouses.

'The Money Opera', which I recently saw, was directed by Amitesh Grover, a theatre director from Delhi. The venue was a dilapidated building in Delhi's Okhla area and the audience had to move from one room to another, listening silently, almost accidentally, to the murmurings of 'lost lives'. Narratives piled on narratives, crisscrossing and entangling into each other, collapsing and collating in a rhizomatic gaze. Who was watching whom, became the troubling question. "Money Opera" needed an abandoned building, but the space needed to be altered by texturing the walls. Interven-

tions became a necessary tool as the fictional world of the play had to inhabit the building. To make the design so invisible that no one notices what was added and what already existed," says Grover.

To share the experience of an immersive and participatory play, I recall Deepan Sivaraman's 'The Legend of Khasak', an adaptation of OV Vijayan's famous novel 'The Legends of Khasak', which was performed in a massive field at Thrikkaripur in Kerala. A large ground surrounded the audience — or should I say embraced the audience. An actor/tailor invited a member of the audience and measured him for a shirt that was to be tailored during the course of the play. The sound of the tailor's machine along with the Mappila food served to a few members of the audience made the atmosphere smell of fried fish and coconut oil. The experience was not only olfactory but also gave one the feeling of being transported inside the story.

Another play that made me recognise the role of space in performance was a devised production, 'The Drive', which provided one of the most powerful examples of 'audience as witness'. Individual booths were created, almost like a prison barrack, cramped, overcrowded, with the actors tightly packed in a claustrophobic space. The audience bullied, cajoled and also empathised with the actors, while the actors shared their stories undeterred by the jeering audience or the appreciative applause. A panopticon penitentiary making the private/public lines dissolve.

The question that arose while watching the show: who was watching whom? Who was the performer and who was the audience? From this experience, I recognised that we don't only go to watch a play, but take ourselves to the show.

In most performances held in an auditorium, we sit in neat rows in the dark, hardly acknowledging the presence of strangers with whom we sit shoulder to shoulder, and certainly never expecting the actors to invade our space, or to stake a claim to theirs.

'The Empty Space' written by Peter Brook turned every pre-conceived notion on its head. "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged." This book created a storm and in one instant changed the approach and affirmed that all that was required to make a play was an empty space.

Déjà vu in Jalandhar

APARNA BANERJI

IT was five decades ago that Ustad Nishat Khan debuted on the Harivallabh stage with his father, the sitar and surbahar legend Ustad Imrat Khan. Their *gharana*, Imdadkhani, has been serving classical music for seven generations. Nishat Khan's London debut (also with his father) at Queen Elizabeth Hall earned him "daad" from Pt Ravi Shankar himself, who sat in the first row. Amidst the 30-second bytes vying for social media attention, Khan's musical philosophy still advocates slowness and restraint as he harbours a subtle disdain for live streaming and advertising oneself on social media. "Music is meant to be savoured by those who show up," he says.

THE IMDADKHANI LEGACY

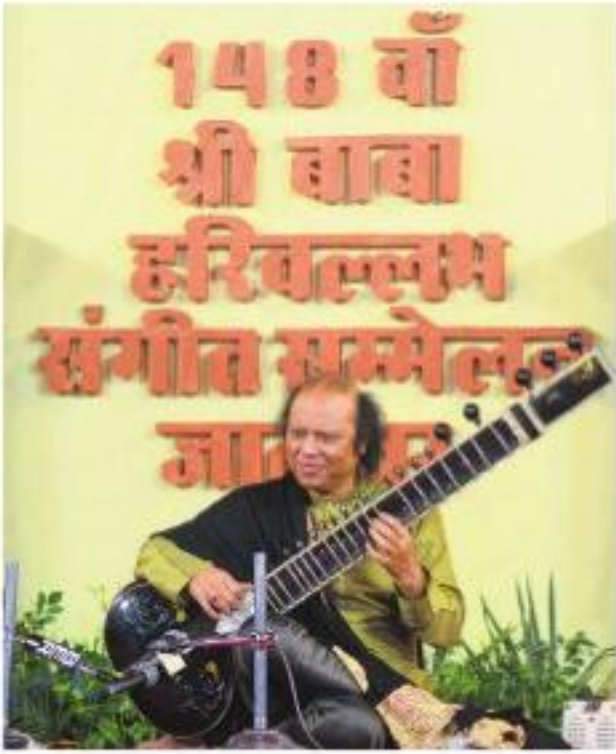
"We hail from Etawah. The *gharana* is named after my great grandfather, Ustad Imdad Khan *sahib*. My father was my *guru* and teacher. I grew up listening to him and uncle (Ustad Vilayat Khan). My *dadi* shared nuggets of wisdom from time to time. Our generation worked very hard. We understand the importance of a master. That's how we learn the technicalities. Every *raga* has a reason. You can't learn this on YouTube. Music wasn't just flowing on my paternal side. My father's maternal grandfather was Ustad Bande Hassan Khan *sahib* from Nahan (now in Himachal Pradesh), a renowned vocalist. My father did immense research on *dhrupad* and *khayal*. I picked all these and play in my own style, mixing the three *angis* — *tantrakari*, *gayaki* and *dhrupad*."

HARIVALLABH MEMORIES

"I first played at Harivallabh in 1974. There used to be a huge *pandal* right next to Devi Talab; mattresses were spread on the floor. Zakir (Hussain) *bhai* played with me. We were both very young... it was a wonderful concert. Back then, the festival spanned four days and nights and was attended by music greats. People sang and played in intense cold. We would drive through Punjab's winter landscape. A fan used to bring *murgi ka aachaar* (chicken pickle). Their kids met me this time too. Jalandhar had this entire cultural thing going. It makes me very nostalgic. It kindles stories and associations."

ENSEMBLE GILLES BINCHOIS

"Meeting of Angels", my collaboration with Gregorian chant choir Ensemble Gilles Binchois, definitely involved spirituality — that was the only reason I did the project. You



Ustad Nishat Khan on his Harivallabh debut in 1974 and why he shies away from social media attention

feel that energy, vibration and space. I played with the silences. My sentiment needed to come across."

CITIES IMPACT MUSIC

"Where you live has a huge influence on you as a musician. In Bengal, where I grew up, I played sitar for my friends all the time. Kolkata was vibrant with music conferences those days. People listened to greats such as Amir Khan *sahib*, Ali Akbar Khan *sahib*, Bismillah Khan *sahib* and Amjad Ali Khan *sahib*. I was also fortunate to have spent time in Bombay and Delhi. In Delhi, my friends — Shafaat Ahmed Khan, Ustad Mashkoor Ali Khan, Madhup Mudgal — and I would talk of music, eat and walk in Old Delhi... I was a huge movie buff and would visit theatres every second day. I could see an Amitabh Bachchan film 11 times."

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ARTISTES

"The issue with live streaming is that there's no vibration. People must show up in person to listen to concert music. Someone else handles my social media accounts. I have a glamorous life, but it's private. I don't feel the urgency to put my Starbucks visit or music out on it. For those doing it, I'd advise caution. That 30-second attention-span syndrome is in fashion. But in classical music, it's often inadequate and dangerous."

Another discovery of India

MAUVIKA KAUL

THE treasure of ancient Indian paintings has been mostly inaccessible to art lovers. Age has damaged and even destroyed several creations discovered in temples and caves. Filmmaker, photographer and art historian Binoy K Behl's exhibition, 'Lost Ancient Art Revealed' (January 6-19, India International Centre, New Delhi), is a remarkable attempt to bring one face-to-face with the earliest surviving masterpieces, mostly inspired by Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions.

The exhibition showcases close to 80 photographs of some of the foremost murals from the caves in Ajanta (Maharashtra) and Badami (Karnataka) and the Brihadiswara temples in Tamil Nadu. There are also images of art found in Nako monastery and Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. Besides photographs of art dating from the 2nd century BC to 10th century, the exhibition includes at least 40 digitally restored images that give a glimpse of the original craft. Prof Behl has taken these photographs in low-light and while working on their digital restoration, he has focussed on highlighting the original grace and nuances of the paintings.

For many years, several of the images were locked in his studio and he sat down to review the almost 30-year collection only during the pandemic.

Persons who created the now famous images of Bodhisattvas Padmapani and Vajrapani, or the Dancing Girl of Ajanta were extraordinary not only in their skill, but also in their approach to life. For the hard-edged world today, the images convey a sense of grace and sublimity and Prof Behl wanted to share this experience with the outside world.

The earliest Buddhist paintings (2nd century BC) were discovered in the Ajanta caves in 1819. The sophisticated quality of art of the murals in the monasteries and halls of the rock-cut caves were not clearly visible to viewers due to the dim light. Several were covered with graffiti scribbled by tourists. In 1990, Behl was informed by Union government's Department of Culture that the paintings in Ajanta had never been photographed, either comprehensively or with accuracy of colour. Consequently, the tourists failed to witness the luminous quality of colours that the ancient artists had used and the richness of details. For the Archaeological Survey of India, providing dim light in the caves was an attempt to preserve the murals. "The paintings were per-



A mural at Ajanta. 2nd century BCE; (below) the digitally restored mural.



Worshipper. Brihadiswara temple; (below) restored mural.



Prof Binoy K Behl (inset) highlights the original grace of the paintings.

An exhibition reveals ancient masterpieces from caves and temples, photographed and digitally restored

ceived to have a very orangish cast as compared to their real colours. The blues and greens, in particular, were largely lost in the viewing and the colour cast created took away much of the sense of depth in the painting," says Prof Behl. Using his Nikon F3, he set out to document what would soon become a treasure for the world of art.

The IIC exhibition offers an opportunity to appreciate the paintings closer to the original vision. For the first time, the photographs enable a viewer to see the art with more detail. The show gains significance as there are very few surviving paintings depicting ancient Hindu traditions and themes. Like, the compositions in the Badami caves and Brihadiswara temple are mostly damaged. Prof Behl says that

several of the murals in the Badami caves, referenced in some books in the 1950s, could not be located when he went to photograph them in 2001. In 2008, the *National Geographic* magazine attempted to do a story based on Prof Behl's work in the Badami caves. But they could not spot even the paintings Prof Behl himself photographed seven years ago! His photography and restoration are thus critical, documenting and revealing the valuable tradition of Indian paintings either lost or rapidly deteriorating.

Photographing the 10th century paintings found in the inner ambulatory corridor of the Brihadiswara temple at Thanjavur earned Prof Behl appreciation from several art scholars. Dr Milo C Beach, among others, was forced to relook at Indian art history.

In recent years, he has been invited by several museums and universities of the world to share his knowledge and perspective. For him, it is a labour of love and devotion. Several of the digitally restored images are now available in a new edition of his well-known book, 'The Ajanta Caves'.



Outsider's view of India in 18th century

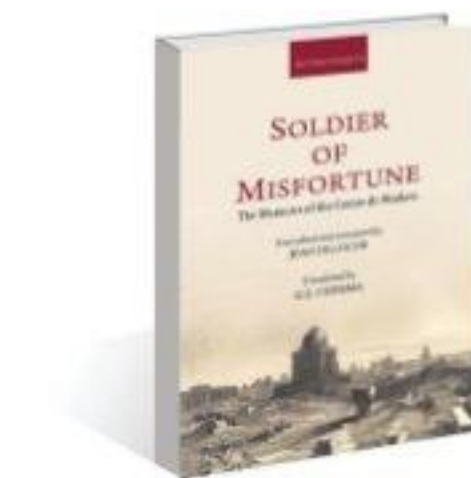
SALIL MISRA

IN its long history, India has always attracted a large number of outsiders, not just rulers and conquerors, but also traders and travellers. Some of them left important accounts of Indian society and polity. It all started with Megasthenes, the ambassador from Greece, who made some profound observations on India in his book 'Indica', over 2,000 years ago. Since then, there has been a long chain of observations by outsiders on India. Being outsiders, they noticed some distinctive features, which would not have been noticed by Indians. These observations contain crucial insights for historians trying to understand the country's past. They actually constitute important source material for creating historical knowledge.

The book under review contains the observations and memoirs of Comte de Modave, a French army officer-cum-businessman-cum-policy maker, who came to India in 1757, 1764 and in 1772, when he lived here till he died in 1777. Modave was an extremely perceptive observer of realities and came in contact with a large number of people in India, both the elite and the commoners. He created a detailed mass of information about India. His observations remained somewhat unknown to people till they were published in French in 1971. His memoirs have now been translated into English and admirably annotated by historian GS Cheema. The book, in two volumes, is a mine of useful information about 18th-century India and is, therefore, of great relevance for professional historians. Modave has written his travel

accounts with rich descriptions of cities such as Patna, Banaras, Faizabad, Delhi and Hyderabad. He has written about people and communities, religions and rituals, agriculture, trade and commerce, and about kings and queens. In short, Modave has cast his glance on political, economic and social history. Common people are as much on his radar as kings.

How did Modave form his impressions about Indian society and people? His opinions and observations were generally based on three sources. Modave inherited the insights offered by his predecessors, who came to India before him. In particular, he relied a great deal upon the impressions left by Charles Bernier, who came to India exactly a century earlier. Interestingly, Modave often found that India had not changed very much during the period between Bernier and him. Secondly, Modave formulated his ideas on the basis of his observations, encounters, and experiences during the long periods of his journeys from Calcutta to Patna and from Faizabad to Delhi. Thirdly, he also imbibed and internalised the general stereotypical ideas that were prevalent during his times. Many shibboleths about India find a mention in his records. To take an example, Modave writes at one place: "Unlike us Europeans, [Indians] are not curious to learn. There are perhaps, not even twenty people in Hindustan who have any detailed knowledge of the history of their own country. Those heading the affairs try to tackle the problems and situations that arise according to their interests and without any reference to the past, and any real understanding as to



SOLDIER OF MISFORTUNE: THE MEMOIRS OF THE COMTE DE MODAVE (2 VOLS)

Text edited and annotated by Jean Deloche.

Translated from French by GS Cheema.

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how the vicissitudes of the past have changed the picture." Now, this is clearly a part of Europeans' entirely mistaken view of Indian history. These notions were subsequently critiqued and repudiated by professional historians. There are many such references which make Modave's account about India interesting, but not always reliable. Many such instances have been pointed out by GS Cheema, the historian-translator, in his notes at the end of the text.

India in the 18th century, as Modave saw, was politically divided into three zones – regions still under Mughal control, those that had passed into British hands, and areas that were somewhat autonomous under local *rajas* and chieftains. Interestingly, Modave observed greater prosperity

not in the centralised zones, but in areas that were relatively free from centralised control, either of the British or of the Mughals. Manufacturing, textiles, farming, animal husbandry, all produced great wealth there.

On the whole, Modave understood India, particularly the parts he visited, as a land of unfulfilled potentials. The soil was extremely fertile, capable of generating prosperity. There was no dearth of wells, canals and other water bodies to irrigate the fields. But, in Modave's view, what obstructed the great Indian potential from being realised was the absence of individual ownership. This gave no incentive to the farmers to try and harness the best results from their fields. This, of course, is an extremely debatable issue and many professional historians have subsequently written on this.

Modave provides some important clues on perhaps the single-most important question in the entire history of modern world. Why was it that the modern world came to be so comprehensively dominated by Europe, when there were no indications of such domination in the period prior to 16th century? Why was it that large Asian civilisations such as India, China and Egypt lagged far behind in the race for global supremacy? Why was Europe selected by history as the leader of modern world? In Modave's view, the explanation lay not so much in economy but in the technology of warfare, recruitment and organisation of the army, military strategy, and coordination among different branches of the army. Evidently, the Europeans were far superior to Indian princes in all these respects. Indians, and other Asian

powers, were absolutely no match for the vastly superior and efficient European armies. The military conquests then paved the way for a comprehensive economic domination. Modave's explanation may not provide the entire clue to the riddle of "European supremacy", but it certainly contains an important dimension of it.

Modave's memoirs contain extremely rich accounts of the India of that time. These may not always be accurate, but are both interesting and illuminating. However, belonging as they do to their own times, his accounts are not expected to contain any reference to India of today. But, importantly enough, they do. To take one example, after highlighting Aurangzeb's fanaticism and intolerance towards Hindus, Modave made an interesting observation in his description of the city of Banaras: "Aurangzeb raised a monument here, which seems to contradict his reputation for bigotry and intolerance. It is a large courtyard... On one side, there is a mosque, and on the other a temple with a large basin with running water for the ablutions prescribed by the law of Muhammad and the institutions of Brahma. This monument to tolerance is a proof that for reasons of state, Aurangzeb kept a careful balance between bigotry and superstition." Sometimes, accounts of the past can give us important clues to the present as well.

This is an extremely useful book not just for scholars but for everyone interested in India's past. It is rich with information on 18th-century India and constitutes an important window for a rich panoramic view of India's past.

Nurturing trees of faith

SARIKA SHARMA

AFTER his victory over Humayun, Sher Shah Suri planted the *chousa* variety in celebration. Mango flowers are used for worshipping Goddess Saraswati. Legend has it that the god of love, Manmadhan, used mango flowers as arrows to ignite love between Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi—the story has inspired poems and stories in both Sanskrit and Urdu. It is this mix of history, mythology, literature and science — thereby underlining the cultural, ecological, mythological and religious value of trees — that makes up V Sundararaju's book, 'Green Pearls of India'.

Bael, katha, neem, coconut palm, banyan, Indian fig, mango, champaka, mahua, shalmali, palash, amla, sandalwood, jamun, tamarind, Arjuna, ber... the list is long — 27 varieties to be precise — and so is the tapestry of stories that the author, a former forest officer, weaves around them.

Each chapter gives details on the habitat and distribution of trees, their environmental, economic, historical, religious and mythological significance, various usages and cultivation practices. Tidbits abound. How bael can grow in the moist dry of forests; how, in evergreen forests, mango is found usually along the streams. Jackfruit has been known in parts of India since 300 BCE and sandalwood since 1500 BCE.

From history, the author delves into mythology, narrating to the readers the stories wherein the trees have been more than a character. He then lists their medicinal properties. Here, supporting scientific studies, if any, could have been mentioned as footnotes to add value to the work.

The author traces the practice of tree wor-



GREEN PEARLS OF INDIA: TRACING THE ROOTS OF SACRED TREES

by V Sundararaju.

Rupa.

Pages 241.

₹595

ship to pre-Indus Valley Civilisation times. The primitive man revered the trees for their life-giving nature. Somewhere along the way, however, this reverence turned into faith. Man then began indulging in religious practices that turned into superstitions and the book lists so many of them. Another drawback of the book is that since the author hails from Tamil Nadu, several cultural references may not ring a bell with the readers in other parts of India.

The role of sacred trees in conservation and increasing tree cover is well-established. Nonetheless, over-exploitation happens. It has rendered the Asoka tree 'vulnerable', the International Union for Conservation of Nature has flagged. Extinction of any tree takes us one step closer to jeopardising our habitat. That makes all trees sacred, doesn't it?

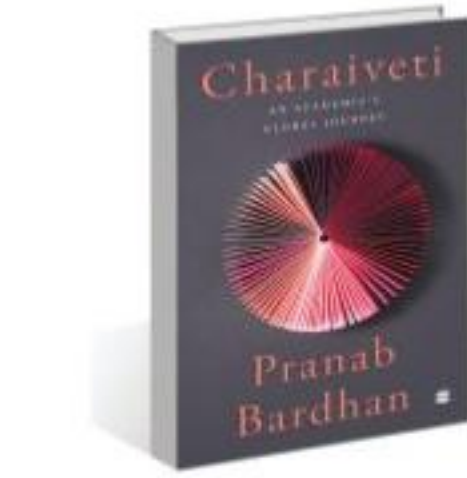
SANDEEP DIKSHIT

THOUGH a memoir by a development economist and social scientist, the book's title may not prompt impulsive, off-the-shelf purchase. It would be better to tabulate what the book is not about. As Pranab Bardhan says, 'Charaiveti' is not a biography but more of an academic's quasi-memoir, with a special effort to keep the interest of non-academic readers alive with a profusion of stories and anecdotes, each of the latter leaving a chuckle behind.

Bardhan may perhaps have borrowed the technique of keeping social commentary to the foreground to keep students engaged in his lectures. On a field trip in the plantations of Kerala spread over undulating hills, he would notice a strange division of sexes when the sirens went off at 5 pm, signalling the close of work. One unending stream of women would head downhill in the direction of their homes and another, entirely of men, in the direction of toddy shops!

The economist, unlike many of his ilk, did not start out from a privileged home. His overcrowded house, with no running water, situated in a filth-strewn Calcutta lane represented and still represents the way most of urban India lives.

The setting where poverty degrades and endows its residents with supernatural canniness to survive awakens him to the actual micro politics that hums through the neighbourhoods — the *mashtans* (musclemen) who run all rackets from prostitution to betting and are connected via an intricate chain to politicians, first of the right and then of the left.



CHARAIVETI: AN ACADEMIC'S GLOBAL JOURNEY

by Pranab Bardhan.

HarperCollins.

Pages 358.

₹699

The four chapters of Bardhan's coming-of-age span India, the US and London, but never does the narration flag, become tendentious or self-obsessed.

This movement across three continents in just his student life is what gives the title of the book — 'Charaiveti' in Sanskrit means 'to keep moving'. And Bardhan has moved. In Geneva for a mind-storming session one day, back to Berkeley, off to India again. It is not for nothing that he accumulated three lakh frequent flyer miles on one airline alone.

But Bardhan never lost sight of his roots. He wonders about the contradic-

tion between cleanliness inside Indian homes versus the squalor outside which, he is convinced, a bit of community work would have set right. Fittingly, his first book on the problem of collective action being at the heart of India's socio-political problems has been his most cited work by social scientists and his contribution to the invention of modern development micro theory acknowledged by all.

This halo sits lightly on Bardhan. As he flitted between world's metropolises, much like the two different streams of men and women coming down from Kerala plantations, his keen eye picks up the changes that have occurred. London's character has changed, for instance. It has become more boisterous. He wonders whether it is because from being once the capital of a plundering empire, London has now become the laundromat for the world's corrupt money.

His early days of poverty, growing up in Calcutta where red was the dominant colour and association with liberal economists do not make him, or perhaps avoided making him, a woolly-headed woke, many of whom flit through his book in delightful chapters on the humaneness of academic greats and the all-too-human bitching in the faculties of hallowed temples of learning of the West and India. And crucially, in an era where the Centre is mangling academic institutions as per its ideological preferences, Bardhan saw it happening earlier in West Bengal with the advent of the Left. Which is why we need to heed his ruminations on how world-class universities elsewhere have managed institutional insulation from the political process and thereby promoted academic excellence.

Why Bangladesh and Nepal fare better

AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY

THIS is a book full of data, and there's always a danger that such a book might get mired in technical jargon, graphs, and percentages. Swati Narayan skillfully avoids that trap. She tells us a story through the everyday lives, struggles and triumphs of actual human beings. The data is right there, holding up the truth of what she is saying, but it never comes in the way of the human story.

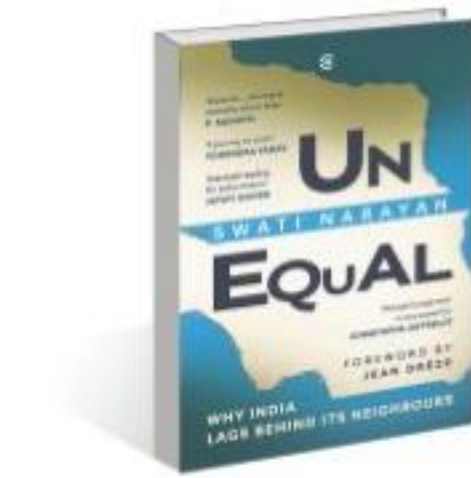
If this book does nothing else, it will rid you of prejudices that you might have about Bangladesh and Nepal. You must have come across headlines in the past couple of years, about how these two nations have outstripped us in key human development indicators. Perhaps, like me, you took this data with a pinch of salt. Swati Narayan's painstaking fieldwork in remote villages in Nepal and Bangladesh brings these numbers to life.

The book will shake readers out of their cosy beliefs about superior living conditions in India. Take the anecdote of the author's encounter with Bangladeshi

men at the international border along West Bengal. When Narayan asked them whether they noticed any contrasts with their fellow Bengalis across the border, they laughed and said, 'Every morning we still see Indians take a dump in the open fields.'

In fact, we learn that almost every home in the villages in Bangladesh and Nepal that the author surveyed had toilets. In comparable villages in Bihar that Narayan studied, less than one in seven homes had toilets. We also learn about the immensely better condition of village schools and health centres in the villages in Bangladesh and Nepal and the resulting outcomes in terms of health and education amongst children, compared to similar villages in Bihar.

Narayan asks the fundamental question — how is it possible for villages with similar income levels in Bangladesh and Nepal to have such significantly better human development standards than that in the Bihar villages? The primary factor seems to be the level of empowerment of women, and their participation in the economy, outside the home. The author found that



UNEQUAL: WHY INDIA LAGS BEHIND ITS NEIGHBOURS

by Swati Narayan.

Westland.

Pages 368.

₹799

women in Bangladeshi villages were much better educated, and a larger number had paid jobs, than their counterparts in Bihar. Breaking stereotypical notions, she found that Bangladeshi women were much more open about sexual health and contracep-

tion. Even though they were clearly living in a patriarchal world, these women appeared to have negotiated spaces of freedom for themselves within patriarchy.

The second important factor, according to the author, is that there was less rampant inequality in the villages she visited in Bangladesh and Nepal, compared to what she found in Bihar. Despite the commonality of caste-based differentiation in both Nepal and Bihar, Narayan found fewer instances of active discrimination in Nepali villages than in their counterparts on this side of the border. Similarly, in Bangladesh, she found a higher degree of community feeling amongst the people she met. Despite the wide income and wealth inequalities in Bangladesh, the urban middle classes were only one step removed from their rural past. This made them more likely to be empathetic towards the needs of other Bangladeshis than the local elites of Bihar for their part.

To my mind, the third factor that Narayan mentions is the most interesting. That has to do with the impact of major political upheavals on social cohesion in Bangladesh and Nepal. She argues that the bloody struggle against West Pakistani

dominance, and the war of liberation that followed, created strong bonds between the Bangladeshi people, transcending differences of class and social capital. The rapes and murders of women, and their organised response to it, helped women seize a modicum of power within society. Similarly, the long civil war between the Maoists and government forces in Nepal, which culminated in the establishment of electoral democracy in that country, also helped dissolve social differences.

This is perhaps where one could draw very different conclusions from what the author has. She admits that Bangladeshi electoral democracy is in a shambles. The last few elections have been questioned, not only by the country's Opposition, but also by global experts. It is now widely termed an electoral autocracy. Yet, it is this autocracy which seems to be delivering on human development, women's empowerment, and overall social equality. A similar case can be made for Nepal, with its endemic governmental instability. The question that sceptics might ask — what is the point of human development if human rights and freedom have to be given up for it?

REFLECTIONS

Secret city and more

TOUCHSTONES
IRA PANDE

BEFORE I go any further, let me wish all my readers a very Happy New Year with the fervent wish that 2024 erases all the misery, tensions and violence that ripped apart 2023. Let us not forget the number of elections that are going to take place this year because they will ignite the hate, anger and frustration of those who will lose. Already, Bangladesh, that will hold its national election today, has seen the curious case of its Nobel Prize winning economist in jail. Mohammad Yunus, widely hailed as the person credited with bringing Bangladesh to its present level of prosperity with his work on micro-finance, is today considered an offender by the Sheikh Hasina government, for reasons difficult to fathom.

Matters are no better in India. Half our Parliament is empty of its elected representatives who belong to the Opposition benches, and each party feels threatened by the ruling party as several political leaders face the Enforcement Directorate or the CBI. In the US, Donald Trump, who leads in the popular ratings, is also at the receiving end of judicial probes... The list of vendetta politics can go on and on. And all this while, more and more of West Asia is being dragged into the Israel-Gaza conflict. Europe has reached a terminal level of fatigue with the Russia-Ukraine war and Biden is no longer able to motivate his western partners to keep doling out aid to Ukraine. So, there is a lot that can make 2024 even worse than 2023, but let's pray that better sense prevails.

Let's now move to a brief trip I made to

Panchkula a few weeks ago to participate in a lit fest hosted by the Bhavan Vidyalyaya there. The event was to honour the memory of an old friend, Sardar Kulwant Singh, who raised the funds to set up this fine institute. When we lived in Chandigarh, almost 30 years ago, Panchkula was a satellite town in the process of developing. We only passed it on our way to and fro the railway station or to spend time at the Mughal Gardens in Pinjore. So, imagine my delight at discovering that it is now a flourishing town with a vibrant life of its own. Sadly, we did not visit Chandigarh at all this time because Panchkula kept me busy. I would have loved to visit *The Tribune* office and surprise the people there but will have to make another trip to meet

Is it not curious that whereas we all have some personal acquaintance with people who are gay, we shy away from publicly acknowledging the fact

them and the old friends in Chandigarh who I missed meeting. However, I was so chuffed to meet some readers who said many kind things about my column. After years of writing it, believe me, it is a big boost to my ego.

I want now to write about a topic that we in India seldom talk about: homosexuality, or same-sex love. Is it not curious that whereas we all have some personal acquaintance with people who are gay, we shy away from publicly acknowledging the fact if it is someone whom we are related to or have a close social relationship with? As I look back at my life, I can now clearly see some uncles or cousins who were gay but were unable to come out of the closet

because there were such strict taboos then about even speaking of it. They were either objects of ridicule for being effeminate or avoided at social celebrations. In fact, there was not even a proper word or term (such as LGBTQ+) prevalent then to describe those who had a different sexual orientation other than the vile gutter language that was used also for genitalia. When you consider how open our ancient texts were and how such characters appear naturally in our religious texts as well, we have to admit that colonialism may be a reason for this prudery.

Victorian and Edwardian England set the rules for 'polite' words, so we either have highly Sanskritised terms for homosexuality, or gutter-speak from pornography. Incidentally, the most repressed societies, our own included, are the largest consumers of pornography. This is why the decriminalisation of homosexuality needs to be hailed, despite what the prudes have to say. I must recommend to you a recent book that a friend from our Punjab days has written, titled *'The Secret City'*. The author, Robin Gupta, was a part of the IAS and one of its most gentle, well-mannered and urbane members. His book, which I presume is semi-autobiographical, is about a community forced to live a secret life. In Delhi, I was aware of some parties held at private farmhouses of the rich, where such celebrations were described by straight-faced people as 'orgies', sniffing disapprovingly as they said so.

However, it is the poorer sections that bear the worst form of mental and physical cruelty for not being 'normal'. Gupta's book gives us an insight into both these groups and into the savage brutality that was unleashed by the police when they rounded up such 'deviants' from the Central Park in Delhi's Connaught Place, where gay people meet under the cloak of darkness. *'The Secret City'* is a sensitively-written novel about Delhi's unnamed city, its dark self. The book is based on real characters, according to the author, and so has an authenticity to what is possibly the first book on Delhi's gay world. Read it to see a disturbing reality.

Being passive to what you don't like



RABBI SHERGILL

IAM tempted. To hide behind well-spoken defence of confusion and passivity by iconic French philosophers and the gibberish of surrender by almost anyone on the streets of India. Sufficient range of camouflage there, you'd think. For some reason, the thick cover isn't enough to cover the bareness of my conscience's bottom. I'm desperate. I must find some courage in myself and others. I can't again flake out at the slightest push-back. I cannot bear to puff my chest out in the shiny West, knowing full well I didn't fight back home. I cannot take shelter in an identity that brooks no questioning. I need harmony between the individual and the social but I need so much more.

I try to trace — laughably and grandly — the origin of my alienation and through it, hopefully that of our collective apathy. I'm trying nothing less than the reverse engineering of my own wholeness.

It's a subtly lit, luxuriously decorated restaurant, trays of hot food rest in our midst. Piped esoteric music knits 3D weaves with the Michelin-level aroma. I'm surrounded by people I should love. But I can see myself in their eyes. Vacant. Uninterested. Far away. 'I should be more involved.' I'm appalled by my own aloofness. But I do nothing. I have to go through this tunnel of indifference. There's a purpose to it. I can feel its gravitational pull. Then, slowly, like the moon on a smoggy night, it reveals itself. Mercifully arranging itself into a sentence: You're passive to what you don't like. Phew! There goes the weight of scumbaggery off my head. I'm not a bad person, I've just run dry of liking.

Suddenly and briefly, you understand almost everyone and everything. You understand the aunty who gets restless if you want to discuss the 500 AQI outside her elegant drawing room, or the perceived lack of freedom with an ideologue, or the shocking state of aesthetics with an architect, or mediocrity with a music band, probity with a politician, nobility with a doctor, morality with a journalist or plain compassion with your average human being. We understand the premise, we grasp its gravity but do nothing about the issue as it requires liking something other than yourself. Anything. It's just that our hypothalamuses have run bone dry. Shot. Empty. There's no more oxytocin, the liking hormone, to be had. The junkie is all tapped out. Bottom of the barrel.

What sucks me in is the why of it. Why do we all lose it? Is it a biological inevitability like loss of hair or bone mass? Or is there a sociological, cultural, perhaps even topographical, layer to it? In all honesty, I'm out of my depth here. Shaping of something as all-encompassing as the

human psyche is going to have layers I cannot begin to conceive. But being the *vehla* that I am and having taken out the best part of the day to write this article, or should I say blog(?), I feel no need to rein in my horses. So, with the help of some borrowed whips, here goes nothing. Giddy up! 'Species being'. There! That's the phrase I've been meaning to drop all of a day and half. Hegel, Marx, Feuerbach have all used it. But it's Harvard professor Rajani Kanth's musings on it that make me hum like a tuning fork. He contends that the current global way of life closely follows the path of its Euromodernist masters. Which "at its very zenith... leads us only to our... contemporary reality of a Casino Economy, a Video Culture, and a Techno-Fascist Polity [sic]." Woah! When you're right, you're right! Wait, there's more. Sample these gems:

■ "Fundamentally, the EM project was to stand all prior ideas about human culture on their head, and to reinvent all epistemologies..."
■ "Its philosophy is worthless, its politics corrupt, and its economics simply heinous."

Why do we all lose it? Biological inevitability, or is there a cultural, sociological layer to it?

■ "We humans were atomised to the point of being viewed as mechanical robots, with society itself individuated..."

■ "Our highest anthropic need is simply to huddle, not to spend life on a treadmill, in endless forced labours that serve mainly to enrich and empower others."

Savour these in your own sweet time. Let me encapsulate the Professor's ideas for you. Actually, it's just the old origins story — demystified:

There existed an idyll. Its precarious balance maintained by instincts. The human primates sought light and warmth. The men were occasionally violent, the women consistently peaceable, like chimps and bonobos, respectively. Tribal affections and feminine nurturing ensured a state of grace for infinity. Then civilisation exploded. And about 400 years ago, Anglo-Normans, through the ideas of Euromodernism, enslaved the planet. It's brought us to a point where only violent male fantasies rule while we are forced to exist in violation of our instinctive nature, destroying our habitat, locked in a death wish creating an endless train of pathologies. The save is to re-claim our specie instincts and letting feminine grace heal us, hypothalamus and all.

Noble words indeed. How do we turn them into actions? My suggestion: by ensuring they are read in the institutions that shape us — classrooms, assemblies, spontaneous gatherings. In songs, in art, in verse, in prose, in sound, in silence, in love, in rage, in life, in death, in the face of a baton, to the face of a lover... until the words fire neurons, fire synapses, fire axons... and light up the world.

War hero and Olympic champion

Recipient of Vir Chakra for bravery in the 1962 war and a member of the Indian hockey teams that won gold medals in the 1956 and 1964 Olympics, **Lt Col Haripal Kaushik (ret'd)** passed away in Jalandhar in 2018. A chapter in a new book, *'Camouflaged: Forgotten Stories from Battlefields'* by Probal Dasgupta (Juggernaut), recalls his inspirational story. His daughter **Veronica Kaushik** pens a tribute...

TO the world, my father was a war hero and an Olympic champion. Everyone who knew him remembers him as a humble, kind-hearted, yet strong-willed, person. To me, he was the sweetest father — in fact, after my mother passed away, he gave me the love of both parents.

Belonging to Khusrupur village close to Jalandhar, my father saw great highs and terrible lows in his life, but he never lost his humility, sincerity and sense of humour. He never got angry with anyone, never raised his voice.

He had such a commanding personality that just one look from him would make you realise he was displeased about something. But he had a helpful nature and was very social. He never missed any opportunity to meet people. He was a great conversationalist — loved telling jokes and stories, and he used to read endlessly.

My father believed in commanding respect by being respectful to others. That trait never left him throughout his hockey days, or when he served in the Army (having retired as Lt Colonel from 1 Sikh Regiment), or when he became the general manager at a sugar mill in



Lt Col Haripal Kaushik (ret'd) receiving the Arjuna Award from then President KR Narayanan.

Phagwara and helped revive the company. All his colleagues adored and respected him.

Despite all his accomplishments in different fields, his true love was hockey. In his childhood, he loved playing the sport and would mostly be in the field and never in class. His teacher used to say to him, *'Haripal, yaa taa hockey khed lai, yaa class laa leya kar'* (either play hockey or come to class). He used to smile while telling me this anecdote.

He never lost that dedication towards the game. He used to tell me that his shoulder would often get dislocated while playing. He would just get off the field, set his shoulder back himself and start playing again. He won two Olympic gold medals (Melbourne in 1956 and Tokyo in 1964) and an Asian Games title, but among his teammates and juniors, he is remembered for

being an unselfish player. He would never show off and always pass the ball. Another thing that everyone told me about him was that he was always smiling on the hockey field and was never disheartened by any situation.

It was his resolve that helped him survive the harsh terrain and biting cold for days after an enemy ambush during the 1962 Sino-Indian war. He told me that they had to even eat snakes to survive. He was awarded the Vir Chakra. But it was a terrible time for him and he rarely spoke about the war. Two years later, he was part of the hockey team that won the Olympic gold and it probably helped heal the wounds. Though I don't think that it was something one could forget, he never showed any signs of trauma. He never liked to dwell on the past, and through all his ups and downs, he lived a contented life.

Bring fuel-burning room heaters under ambit of safety norms

CONSUMER RIGHTS
PUSHPA GIRIMAJI

BEFORE going to sleep on a biting cold winter night of January 7 last year, a young couple in Sitapur district of Uttar Pradesh switched on their liquefied petroleum gas (LPG)-fired room heater to keep themselves and their two children — aged three and two — warm. Neither they, nor the children, woke up from sleep the next morning. A month prior to that, another couple from the state's Sambhal district met a similar fate when the duo was found dead and their four-month-old baby unconscious. They had also used an LPG room heater at night. The cause of death in both cases was carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning.

Such tragedies from unvented gas-fired room heaters are not restricted to Uttar Pradesh. One can see reports of such deaths in different parts of northern India during the cold winter months every year. In villages, towns and cities that are prone to long power outages in winter, gas-based room heaters are preferred over electric room heaters, not just in homes but also hotels.

In states that get heavy snowfall, power supply is often disrupted for long periods as power transformers malfunction and power transmission lines snap. So much so that today, a large variety of these unvented gas-fired room heaters are available in markets, both online and offline. However, in the absence of mandatory quality controls as well as consumer education on the risks involved in the use of these heaters, these are contributing to avoidable tragedies.

Unvented fuel-burning space heaters or portable room heaters that work on gas, kerosene or coal pose the risk of CO poisoning, when used in enclosed spaces or in rooms with inadequate ventilation. The problem can be further exacerbated if these heaters are of poor quality. When LPG, for

example, burns, it produces carbon dioxide (CO₂) and water vapour, besides pollutants like nitrogen oxide and carbon monoxide. However, the amount of CO produced depends on the quality and efficiency of the heater — a good-quality product manufactured with stringent quality and safety standards will release CO within the permissible levels.

However, this does not mean that a good quality heater is safe because there is another factor that determines safety — availability of oxygen for combustion. Whenever a carbon fuel burns efficiently and completely, each carbon atom in the fuel binds with two atoms of oxygen in the air and releases car-

bon dioxide. In the absence of adequate oxygen, however, the carbon atom in the fuel binds with only one oxygen atom (incomplete combustion) and produces CO. Thus, these heaters should always be operated in a room with adequate ventilation. Or else, the heater begins to utilise the oxygen available in the room for combustion, and when that depletes, it begins to release the poisonous CO, a product of incomplete combustion.

The other problem is that CO is an odourless, tasteless, non-irritant gas and consumers do not even realise that they have been exposed to the killer gas. Low to medium levels of CO inhalation can lead to fatigue, dizziness, nausea, headache, vomiting and difficulty in breathing, besides reduced brain function. Higher levels can impair brain functioning and physical coordination, preventing any chance of moving to a safer area. The killer effect is from the fact that CO binds with the haemoglobin in our blood, displacing the oxygen carried by the haemoglobin. Without oxygen, the body's cells and tissues begin to die.

So, electric heaters that comply with mandatory ISI standards are comparatively

safer but that choice is not available to consumers who live in extremely cold climates and do not always have 24x7 power supply. We need to have mandatory quality standards for these gas heaters, with built-in safety features such as 'oxygen depletion sensors' that cut off fuel supply to the heater and shut it down if the level of oxygen in the room goes below the safe level. In normal air, the concentration of oxygen is 21 per cent by volume and concentrations below 19.5 per cent are considered oxygen deficient. The WHO has set limits for CO exposure and CO alarms based on it should also become mandatory.

Electric room heaters cannot be sold without the mandatory ISI mark, issued by the Bureau of Indian Standards. But, unfortunately, there is no such safety stipulation for these fuel-burning heaters. This must be addressed urgently, and these heaters must be brought under mandatory quality and safety certification without delay. Meanwhile, manufacturers as well as the government should educate consumers on the need to use these heaters only in well-ventilated spaces and never to sleep leaving the heater on, besides using CO alarms.

We need to have heaters with built-in safety features that shut down if the level of oxygen in the room goes below the safe level



Hattees comprise 63 per cent of the population of the trans-Giri area of Himachal. This translates into 1.6 lakh people residing in 95 villages across the Assembly segments of Shillai, Paonta Sahib, Renukaji & Pachhad in Sirmour district. TRIBUNE PHOTOS: LALIT KUMAR

Hattees of Sirmaur

Himachal HC has stayed the notification, but the community insists that Scheduled Tribe status offers a lifeline. It remains a divisive issue

AMBIKA SHARMA IN AANJ BHOJ

HATTEES of the Jaunsar Bawar area (then in Uttar Pradesh and now in Uttarakhand) were granted the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status way back in 1967. On January 1 this year, their counterparts in Himachal Pradesh — the Hattee community of the trans-Giri area of Sirmaur — were notified as an ST community by the state government.

Three days later, the Himachal Pradesh High Court stayed the notification. March 18 is the next date of hearing.

In their petitions, the Giripar Anusuchit Jaati Adhikari Sanrakshan Samiti and Gujjar Kalyan Parishad had challenged the constitutional validity of the notification and questioned the justification of granting ST status to Hattees. They contended that there was no material on record to show as to why “upper caste and well-off social groups” like Khash-Khanet (Rajput) and Bhat (Brahmin) castes have been given the status of ST and why the six castes notified as Scheduled Caste have been shown as ST.

The ethnographic report of 2018, it has been alleged, was a political document created to serve the interests of Brahmins and Rajputs. Members of the Gujjar community, the only ST in the area, say they would be crowded out of the benefits like reservation in jobs and educational facilities available to them.

The court observed that “we are also prima facie of the view that mere residence in a difficult geographical area would not entitle the forward castes to claim to have the disadvantage which Scheduled Tribes suffer and claim ST status... if interim orders are not granted, tens of thousands of ST certificates would be granted, reversal of which would be difficult”.

The HC order is a setback to the Hattee community, spread across the Himachal-Uttarakhand border in areas adjoining Giri and Tons rivers.

The Hattees comprise 63 per cent of the population of the trans-Giri area of Himachal. That translates into 1.6 lakh people residing in 95 villages of 58 panchayats across the Assembly segments of Shillai, Paonta Sahib, Renukaji and Pachhad in Sirmaur district.

The close-knit community thrives by selling home-grown vegetables, crops, meat and wool in the small urban markets.

The Hattees in both states have similar social as well as cultural traditions and speak the same language. They are governed by traditional councils called ‘*khumbli*’, akin to the *khaps* of Haryana. The community does not encourage inter-caste marriages and follows a rather rigid caste system. Polyandry is a part of the culture though the trend is registering lesser acceptance among the youth.

Traditional foods include *kheer*, *patande* and *askali*. Animal sacrifice, folk dances and the unique attire — *Thalka* or *Lohiya* — are the hallmarks of the community.

Now put on hold, the notification added them to the list of STs in Himachal Pradesh. It comprises Gaddis, Gujjars, Kinnauras, Lahaulas and Pangwalas, besides some smaller tribes. Kinnaur is a prime example of how the grant of ST status can bring about socio-economic transformation. Several civil services’ officers hail from the district.

The interior areas of the trans-Giri area of Sirmaur face a topographical disadvantage, leading to an absence of jobs and the slow pace of development. A 97-km national highway crisscrossing the length and breadth of the area linking Paonta Sahib to Shillai and Gumma is being carved out, but life in the interior villages is yet to see any major transformation.

Agriculture and animal husbandry continue to be the main vocations. Since the size of the landholdings has been shrinking because of division of land, residents have been moving out to Paonta Sahib, Kala Amb and Nahan to eke out a living. Though educational facilities have been



Bereft of any modern facility, firewood lights the kitchens in several households even today.

given a push by opening 14 colleges in the area, majority of them offer only graduation in arts. A large number of girls from the rural area have got themselves enrolled.

Life is particularly tough for women, who have to attend to agrarian work, besides domestic chores. Bereft of any modern facility, it is firewood which lights the kitchen in several households even now. “Absence of proper roads is a deterrent to bring LPG to our doorsteps,” says Lalita, a villager.

“ST status would ensure a better life for children as well as women. They can look forward to securing jobs. It will bring economic prosperity,” quips Ranjita Chauhan from Bharli village. She also speaks of the benefits of subsidised fee for the children.

Babita Parmar, pradhan of Shiva gram panchayat, asserts that the youth will get an opportunity to surge ahead.

Absence of jobs is a key concern in Aanj Bhoj area of trans-Giri. The villagers say unemployment has been a cause of depression among the youth and cases of death by suicide are not uncommon.

Roads in several villages in the interiors are either single-lane or are yet to be concretised. This has affected transportation facilities, and children have to walk several kilometres to reach their schools. “Our children walk long distances to Nageta village for primary as well as secondary education as that is the nearest school in the vicinity,” says Ranjita Chauhan.

“Only a handful of resourceful youth manage to seek higher education. The younger generation today shies away from opting for hard work involved in farming and hence they move out for jobs in industrial areas,” asserts Satish Kumar.

From few roads to no roads, connectivity eludes several villages in the Renukaji Assembly segment. “Residents from Kyari and Dadua villages in Chhachheti panchayat of Dharti Dhar have to trudge a hill overlooking Giri river to reach towns like Renukaji. The situation worsens during rains when the children face the risk of slipping from hills. Construction of the Satuan-Chandni-Renuka road has not been taken up since 1978,” rues Som Dutt, a resident of Chandni village.

Expecting Central aid for providing road connectivity, he says, “It is lamentable that successive governments have not given serious attention to this road, which if constructed will be a boon to develop the most backward areas of Sirmaur.”

Kundan Singh Shastri, general secretary, Kendriya Hattee Samiti (KHS), a non-political organisation which spearheaded the move for grant of ST status, says, “Jaunsar Bawar, which was granted this status in 1967, saw huge developmental activity while the trans-Giri area lagged behind.” He adds that “though it was easier to attain this status in 1967, the lack of visionary

DEMAND FOR ST STATUS

■ The initial exercise began in 1979-80 during the tenure of BJP’s Shanta Kumar as Chief Minister. The ST panel recommended grant of ST status to residents of trans-Giri in Sirmaur.

■ In 1993, the Vidhan Sabha’s Representation Committee was constituted. It surveyed the trans-Giri area and presented a favourable report to the Union government.

■ In 2011, members of the Hattee Samiti met the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Tribal Affairs Minister as well as the Registrar General of India (RGI). They were led by Shimla MP Virender Kashyap.

■ In 2013, an ethnographic survey was conducted by Himachal Pradesh University’s Tribal Research and Study Institute.

■ Their cause got an impetus when Rajnath Singh, the then BJP national president, announced to grant ST status during the election campaign in 2014 in the district.

■ In 2016, the report was sent by the then Virbhadr Singh-led government to RGI in 2016. The proposal, however, did not find favour with the Centre as the ethnography report supporting it was termed inadequate. An ethnographic study involves the systematic study of people in their natural environment to comprehend their way of life, including how they see and interact with the world around them.

■ Undeterred by the slew of queries, the members of Kendriya Hattee Samiti (KHS) assiduously pursued their agenda and met Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017.

■ In a bid to give another push to the issue, a nodal agency was set up by the Jai Ram Thakur-led BJP government in 2018 for carrying out research on the issues relating to the tribals. The agency collected corroborative



In some areas, children have to walk several kilometres to reach their schools.

tive data from the field and prepared another ethnographic survey report.

■ It was on January 3, 2022, that representatives of the Hattee community once again met the RGI in Delhi under the leadership of Shimla MP Suresh Kashyap.

■ Yet another team met Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi on April 24, 2022. With the Vidhan Sabha polls round the corner, the BJP was keen to abide by their hitherto unfulfilled promise of 2014.

■ It was on September 14, 2022, that the Union Cabinet approved a constitutional amendment for granting two lakh Hattees from 154 panchayats of the trans-Giri area the ST status.

■ The Bill received the President’s assent & was notified in the Union gazette in Aug 2023.

■ January 1, 2024: HP government issues notification granting ST status.

■ January 4: HP High Court stays the notification.

political leaders who could seriously pursue the case delayed its implementation”.

On the social disparity in the region, he says the “percolation of education and availability of jobs will bring economic prosperity and gradually help in removing social evils that are prevalent in all societies”. Eleven other castes that have been left out, he says, are keen to get this status given the gains it will fetch for the people. “The most significant gain would be preservation of the rich cultural traditions.”

Shillai MLA Harshwardhan Chauhan says the ST status will enable the youth to apply for government jobs at the state and all-India level, as well as get admission in premier institutes, besides fee reduction.

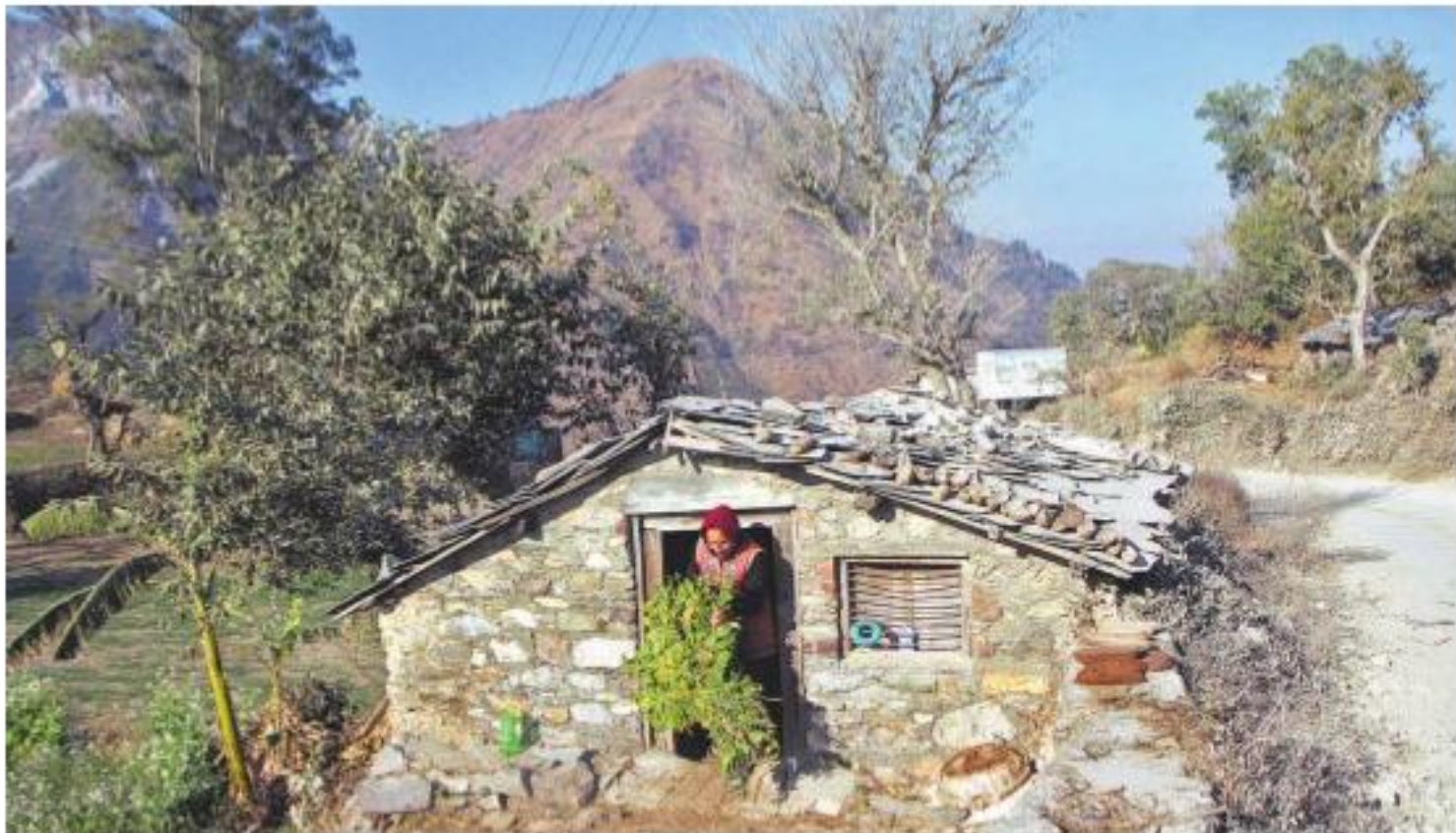
Former Shillai MLA Baldev Tomar, who played a key role in pursuing the grant of ST status, says it ensures dedicated funds under the tribal sub-plan. Central schemes like Ekalavya Model Residential Schools and scholarships can also be availed.

The Lokur Committee set up in 1965 for

defining ST criteria had recommended five criteria for identification — primitive traits, distinct culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact and backwardness. This formed the basis of the ethnographic report which paved way for grant of the ST status.

Members of the Scheduled Caste and Gujjar communities have opposed the move. The SCs feel it will lead to exploitation by the upper castes like the Bhat and Khash, who have now been granted the ST status. They illustrate this by the large number of cases registered under the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Their claim is, however, rejected by Ran Singh Chauhan of the KHS. He says conviction was granted in merely five of the 83 cases registered since 2015-16. In 32 cases, the accused were acquitted.

The Gujjars say the Registrar General of India had not found favour with the proposal thrice. For the Hattees, though, the grant of ST status is nothing short of a lifeline. It remains a divisive issue.



Agriculture and animal husbandry continue to be the main vocations.