The Tribune
ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Pakistan polls

Candidates backed by Imran's party make gains

INDEPENDENT candidates backed by jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) sprung a surprise in the general election, upstaging three-time premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Even as the counting of votes and declaration of winners were marked by chaos and delays, Nawaz suffered a shock defeat to PTI-supported Shahzada Khan from the Mansehra seat. He, however, defeated another independent candidate, Yasmin Rashid, to clinch the Lahore seat.

Members of the PTI contested as independents after they were not allowed to use the party symbol (cricket bat) in the February 8 polls, which were held amid a controversial countrywide mobile phone shutdown. The provisional results show that cricketer-turned-politician Imran, the founding chairman of the PTI, has made his presence felt despite being barred from contesting the elections due to his conviction and sentencing in multiple cases. Imran, who was ousted as PM in 2022, continues to be a popular leader. His arrest in May last year had sparked violence in many parts of the country; protesters had even targeted military installations, including the army headquarters in Rawalpindi.

The PTI's success is a setback to the Pakistani military, which had thrown its weight behind the Sharifs and gone all out to keep Imran out of the electoral contest. Confident of forming the government at the Centre, Imran's party has ruled out forging an alliance with its main rivals — the PML-N and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's Pakistan People's Party. Meanwhile, PML-N leader Ishaq Dar has claimed that some victorious independent candidates have contacted his party. An intriguing power tussle has begun in the beleaguered country, which is hoping for a stable and strong government that would pull it out of a prolonged economic crisis.

Mauled by dogs

Distressing cases warrant decisive action

TWO fatal attacks by stray dogs in a week at Passan Kadim village in Kapurthala district of Punjab exemplify the complete lack of sincerity of civic bodies across the state in keeping cities and towns clean as well as safe. That such incidents — pedestrians becoming victims of assaults and canines turning man-eaters due to various reasons — are regularly reported across the country is distressing and has spread fear and insecurity among residents of localities abounding with packs of stray dogs.

It calls for a review of the policies so as to effectively mitigate the conditions that trigger a proliferation of stray dogs and make some of them turn killers. Rapid urbanisation, inefficient waste disposal and poorly enforced animal control measures are largely to blame for the sorry state of affairs. The ill-maintained carcass dumping yard (*hadda rori*) at Passan Kadim is believed to have led the strays to become feral scavengers.

The sterilisation and vaccination of stray dogs and shelter and adoption programmes are among the compassionate solutions that strike a balance between ensuring public safety and respecting animal rights. However, there seem to be gaps in the implementation of these policies. Technology should be leveraged to execute the plans, with the stray dogs being monitored with GPS tracking collars. Efficacious strategies can then be devised to address the problem. If all else fails and the aggressive dogs continue to imperil human lives, it would not be wrong to consider the contentious option of culling the killers. The frequent fatal attacks on children and adults, especially the elderly, by dogs warrant decisive action.

ON THIS DAY...50 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

CHANDIGARH, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 1974

RETIRED PEOPLE'S LIB

THE Punjab Chief Minister, Zail Singh, wants to retire government servants at 55. He has sent his proposal to the Centre. If the Centre approves it, he would implement it the same day without wasting a minute. He has calculated that an honest IAS officer can make up to Rs 2 lakh in 30 years of service. An honest PCS officer can make half as much. Therefore, he says, their families will not starve if they retire at 55. Now, there are honest officers and dishonest officers. The estimates are only for the honest officers. How much the dishonest officers make is anybody's guess. But it must be considerably less than what the honest politicians make. By the way, there are no dishonest politicians in the lexicon of Tammany. George Washington Plunkitt spoke up for all politicians when he earnestly pleaded for a distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft. "There is an honest graft," he said. "And I'm an example of how it works." As loyal servants, the officers would perhaps be willing to grant that. But they are bound to dispute the assertion that a couple of lakhs is all that is required for a comfortable old age. Look at America, where the inflation is not all that bad as here. There, one who starts to work at 18 and lives with a 5.5 per cent inflation will see prices double before he is 31. He will see prices doubled for the third time before his 57th birthday. If he is unlucky enough to reach 70, he will have to pay 16 times as much for what he buys as he paid when he started out. It has all been nearly worked out by the computer.

Piety hostage to power politics

Suddenly, Everyman becomes the Other and their common sentiment is fear

NOUS INDICA
RAJESH RAMACHANDRAN

BRAZEN: When the fringe elements do not lower their saffron banners even on Republic Day for the Tricolour to be unfurled in all its glory, fear envelops everyone who thinks and votes differently. TRIBUNE PHOTO

THE head of the powerful Gorakshapeeth denomination of the Nath tradition, who also happens to be the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, seems to have taken liberties with the *Mahabharata* in the context of the dispute over the Gyanvapi and Shahi Idgah mosques in Varanasi and Mathura, respectively. CM Yogi Adityanath invoked Krishna, saying in the UP legislative assembly that he is seeking just three religious places, like the Lord who had sought only five villages for the Pandavas, adding that when these villages were denied, the Mahabharata war became inevitable.

Well, Krishna, as the Pandava emissary to the Kaurava court, first asked for half the kingdom, then five villages, then one village, then five houses, then one house; when he was told that the Pandavas would not be given a place even to put a needle and when the Kauravas tried to take Krishna a prisoner, his mission failed. The epic says he exhibited his *vishwaroopam* (the magnificent self) before exiting the court. These stories are played and replayed in classical culture across the east and south of India.

In fact, despite demolishing the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi and the Krishna temple in Mathura, Aurangzeb could not do much to the native Indian culture. For instance, it was just the other day I was searching on YouTube the famous "*yahi madhava yahi keshava*" song from Jayadeva's *Gita Govindam* when the search threw up many versions: As accompaniment for Kelucharan Mohapatra's Odissi performance and a bharatanatyam recital, then as vocal rendition by Kishori Amonkar and then again in the *sopana sangeetham* tradition of Kerala, and even as film lyrics, the same Sanskrit song creates multiple worlds of musical brilliance.

If Jayadeva, who lived in the 12th century in a village between Bhubaneswar and Puri, is celebrated every day in another remote corner of the country — once ravaged by Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the French and the British — Jayadeva's Krishna does not really need another temple. For all its faults, it is piety that preserved the Indian classical culture, not power politics. It is this piety that bound India together as it expressed itself in Gandhian nationalism.

Now, when the same traditions and symbols of piety and penance are used to seek political power, it evokes fear in the minds of those rendered as the Other. A *madrasa* was demolished in Haldwani, Uttarakhand, two days ago, leading to a riot that claimed six lives on Thursday. Earlier this week, a 600-year-old mosque was demolished at Mehrauli in Delhi. Some of these structures might have had encroachments, but then the due process of law would have made the local residents feel secure instead of turning them violently aggrieved.

> When two more mosques are being demanded, what is the guarantee that 20 more will not be demolished?

The Mehrauli and Haldwani incidents do not endorse Yogi's statement asking for just three temples the way Krishna asked for five villages. Even the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), the post-Independence remnant of Jinnah's Muslim League and the biggest party of the Muslims, had officially welcomed the consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya built after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Two days after the event, the Kerala unit president of the IUML, Sayyid Sadiq Ali Shihab Thangal, termed the Ram Temple a reality and said: "We cannot go back from that. There is no need to protest against it. The temple came up based on a court order and the Babri Masjid is about to be constructed. These two are now part of India. The Ram Temple and the proposed Babri Masjid are two best examples that strengthen secularism in our country."

There cannot be a more categorical acceptance of the 'reality' than this. Still, when Yogi asks for two more temples, how should the Muslim community respond? I know of three non-Hindu students of Delhi University who use Hindu names on their cab-hailing and food-delivery mobile apps because they are scared of a possible hate crime. Nothing has happened to them yet, but when the fringe elements are on the loose, trying to establish the primacy of their partisan banner over the national flag or when they do not lower their saffron banners even on Republic Day for the Tricolour to be unfurled in all its glory or when a saffron flag flies over the national flag in a group housing society of civil servants, fear envelops everyone who thinks and votes differently. Suddenly, Everyman becomes the Other and their common sentiment is fear — so fearful that nobody dare ask why the saffron flags cannot be removed long after the temple consecration.

Like Thangal, everybody, every Muslim, wants to move on. But they cannot when they are asked to pay something akin to *jaziya* for Aurangzeb's atrocities. When two more mosques are being demanded, what is the guarantee that 20 more will not be demolished? All those who were present at the consecration of the Ram temple — the Prime Minister, the RSS chief, the UP Governor and Chief Minister — can again sit together and offer a solemn, sacred guarantee to the Muslim community that but for Kashi and Mathura, no mosque will be surveyed or demanded. And drives against encroachments should no longer be 'special' or 'targeted'.

India is an overly religious country. Encroachments in the name of religion turn into extortionist enterprises and hence they ought to be cleared promptly, whenever and wherever they happen. At The Tribune Chowk, there is always a threat of a Shivling appearing miraculously. Whenever it does, we ring the alarm bells to get the encroachment cleared so that Lord Shiva is not demeaned by some roadside racketeer. Similarly, all illegal *madrasas* (actually, religious education should be actively discouraged) should be removed, but only after following the due process of law.

One of the greatest aphorisms from the *Mahabharata* is "*yato dharmastato jaya*", uttered by a mother refusing to bless her son who wouldn't give his cousins what is rightfully theirs.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

> Everything stated in the *Gita* is meant to be tested in the life of every man; it is intended to be verified in practice. —Vinoba Bhave

Grappling with the air scare

CHETANA VAISHNAVI

I feared that I wouldn't last another day if I didn't get the air purifier right away. After convincing my husband of my need for one, we rushed to the big showroom selling the air purifier of my choice. There were just a few units available. As the shopkeeper was giving a demonstration of the new model, other customers resorted to panic buying. Four units were sold within minutes. Fortunately, I was able to get the last piece available that day.

The air purifier was installed immediately after we came home. It showed an air quality index (AQI) of 144. I knew I had been breathing polluted air for quite some time. I had been coughing and wheezing due to poor indoor air.

Earlier, my flat on the ground floor had very effective cross-ventilation. But with so many motor vehicles being used by residents in the neighbourhood, the air entering my house started becoming polluted. Vacuuming the rooms did not help much. Consequently, I covered much of the balcony area through which emissions from cars entered, but to no avail.

Several years ago, while driving on highways along green fields, we would keep the windows of our car open just to breathe in the pure air. Nowadays, while travelling on highways, we usually keep the windows closed in view of the air pollution caused by stubble burning, bonfires or vehicles.

Solid and liquid particulate matter of a diameter of 2.5 microns or less generally pollutes the air. This air can reach the lungs, leading to irritation in the respiratory system and associated problems. Even those with a diameter of 10 microns can enter the lungs.

Air pollution can be due to natural reasons such as dust or wildfire. However, humans are gravely responsible for polluting the air by using fossil fuels for vehicles and operating coal-fired power plants, besides other industrial activities, construction work and stubble burning. The AQI tells people how safe is the air they breathe. An AQI up to 50 is regarded as good and up to 100 is considered moderate. But an AQI above 100 is hazardous to health.

According to a 2023 report, Delhi is the fourth most polluted city in the world after Chiang Mai, Kathmandu and Shenyang. The Delhi government has banned the plying of BS-III petrol and BS-IV diesel four-wheelers. But there is also a need to take strict action against other polluting vehicles, including buses, trucks and tempo travellers.

May we all breathe easy and free!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hate crime in US

With reference to the editorial 'Unsafe in the US'; the death of five Indian-origin students in the United States over the past few weeks must be taken seriously. The US law enforcement agencies have clearly failed. Besides, it is not uncommon for Indian nationals to be the target of hate crime. That makes it all the more important for the US authorities to probe the matter in a time-bound manner. India should raise the issue with the US and ensure that members of the Indian-American community are safe. The US was quick to charge an Indian over alleged involvement in a foiled plot to kill a Sikh separatist on its soil and also hinted that New Delhi had a role in the conspiracy. But the US authorities are slow to act on attacks against Indian students.

ANIL VINAYAK, BY MAIL

Must address brain drain

Apropos of 'Unsafe in the US'; the recent series of deaths of Indian students in the United States is a matter of grave concern. These deaths could be attributed to a number of factors, such as xenophobia, racial hatred, drug addiction and the lax attitude of the authorities there. The onus is on our diplomatic staff in America to ensure the well-being of Indian students there. They must push the law enforcement agencies concerned into action. Exemplary punishment should be awarded to the culprits to set an example. Further, we must not forget that it is the bleak job prospects in India that drive our youth to flee abroad. Sometimes, they even risk their lives by taking the donkey route. The brain drain must be addressed too.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, BY MAIL

Tourists should act responsibly

This is with regard to the editorial 'Pitfalls for tourists'; every time an untoward incident happens, a finger is pointed at the local administration. But it is high time that tourists learnt to act responsibly. Warning boards are in place at many sites, but tourists still choose to take the risk and imperil their own lives. The authorities should not be blamed for the irresponsible actions of the tourists. A tourist must not venture out when the weather is bad. Is it really the authorities' fault if someone chooses to go trekking amid heavy snowfall? Are they not aware of the risks?

RAVINDER SINGH, JALANDHAR

Reaching out to farmers

Refer to 'Centre's outreach to farmers ahead of Delhi Chalo protest'; the Centre has rightly agreed to give compensation of Rs 10 lakh to those injured in the Lakhimpur Kheri violence, cancel the cases registered against farmers during their agitation against the three farm laws, give relief and provide jobs to the kin of the growers killed during the stir. Protests by farmers often result in disruptions. If they launch another protest, thousands of people will have to face inconvenience again. Besides, the farmers must reconsider their decision to hold a protest as the government has accepted their demands.

HMS NAGRA, FARIDABAD

Shut bride bazaar

Apropos of the news report 'Promising to get them brides, Rajasthan gang dupes over 1K'; it is the skewed sex ratio that has left 'overaged' bachelors in Haryana and Rajasthan with no choice but to purchase brides. To dupe those bachelors, the gang cashed in on the fact that such a trade of brides actually exists. It is very worrying that bachelors desperate to get married are falling prey to such frauds. Besides, the fact that so many parents are willing to sell their girls in exchange for money is disturbing. The authorities concerned must look into the matter on priority and end the trade of brides.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI

Stop Nehru-bashing

PM Narendra Modi recently launched a fresh attack on former PM Jawaharlal Nehru in the Rajya Sabha just to garner votes ahead of the Lok Sabha elections by saying that the latter was 'anti-reservation'. Bashing a former PM in Parliament is not appropriate. It seems that even the mention of Nehru is enough to raise the BJP's hackles. Nehru is remembered for his commitment to democracy and the efforts he made to develop the country by investing heavily in critical areas and instilling scientific temper in people. Those in the BJP must stop hitting out at Nehru.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by **e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com**

Tech firms tighten their belts to boost profitability

AUNINDYO CHAKRAVARTY
SENIOR ECONOMIC ANALYST

MY late friend Abheek Barman, a journalist, had come up with a new term in economic theory: mother-in-law industries. He used this neologism for sectors that have found approval with prospective mothers-in-law. That is because a job in such an industry is likely to be stable and lucrative over a long period of time.

In the 1980s, parents would urge their children to become doctors or engineers. Those were the 'mother-in-law' jobs. By the 1990s, the focus had shifted to finance, sales and management. In the late 90s and early 2000s, 'tech' emerged as a new star. As India's technology outsourcing and software services companies boomed and became extremely valuable, computer courses gained massive popularity among Indian middle-class parents. Big Indian tech companies, such as TCS, Infosys and Wipro, became some of our biggest employers. They sent their employees abroad for 'onshore' projects, which opened doors for tech jobs in the US and Europe.

By the mid-2000s, tech companies began proliferating, often founded by senior-level employees of bigger entities. That led to the birth of Mindtree, IGATE and several others. These smaller companies paid higher salaries to attract talent, which in turn made the tech giants raise their pay scales. IT clearly provided some of the best 'mother-in-law' jobs.

Then came the 2008 global financial crisis, which caused a severe economic downturn in the developed capitalist world. Indian IT service companies had to cut costs. Some people were laid off, others took pay cuts, and new employees had to settle for less remunerative packages. Estimates suggest that an average fresher's salary in the IT industry remained roughly the same between 2010 and 2020. Even the startup boom did not make a big difference for techies looking for jobs.

What changed things was the Covid-19 pandemic. Central banks and governments opened their purse strings, letting money flow like water. A large chunk of that went towards looking for new investment opportunities in tech, especially in startups. From the beginning of 2021 to the middle of 2022, tech startups received so much funding that they could afford to throw their cash around at people who could code. Salaries for IT professionals doubled in that single year. As tech companies poached talent, their employers tried to retain them.

CUTTING COSTS: Last year, IT firms sacked employees in large numbers. ISTOCK PHOTO FOR REPRESENTATION

But that sunny period for tech lasted just about a year. A funding winter set in in the second half of 2022, almost as suddenly as the boom had come. Venture capitalists and private equity, which had given money to startups, began pressuring them into cutting costs. And what is the easiest way to reduce expenses? It is to cut the wage bill. From the end of 2022 and throughout 2023, IT firms sacked employees and reduced their numbers.

> In 2021-22, India's IT firms reportedly hired six lakh new techies. This was the highest intake ever. In 2023-24, that number is expected to end at just 70,000-80,000.

Obviously, that meant new jobs were hard to come by.

In 2021-22, India's IT companies reportedly hired six lakh new techies. This was the highest intake ever. In 2023-24, that number is expected to end at just 70,000-80,000. That is more than an 85 per cent drop in recruitment in just two years. This, however, is not just an India story. It is happening across the world. The biggest tech companies in the world are also shedding employees. Amazon, Google and Microsoft have all cut jobs and announced their plans to lay off more people. Other marquee names in the tech and software as a service world, such as Salesforce and eBay, are also pruning their employee headcount.

One big reason for this is that AI has taken over most jobs that involve repetitive tasks that can easily be done by an algorithm. Even more complex word processing-based work can be done much faster by various large language model-based chatbots. Presentations can be made instantly on AI-powered software like Canva, among others. Secretarial jobs, such as maintaining calendars, arranging meetings and managing correspondence, can all be done by apps. Smartcards have made automated security systems more efficient, reducing the need for security personnel. If an office earlier needed 10 people to perform such tasks, it now needs no more than six.

It is understandable that tech companies that have a ringside view of how professional services are getting automated would be the first to implement such automation in their own businesses. One could argue that you need people to write the code to automate tasks for others. But, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, even the least tech-savvy person can now give a series of prompts to an AI chatbot and generate complex lines of code that can be used to build apps without any help from an IT engineer. Very soon, AI will create its own AI without needing any human intervention.

However, this is not the only reason why techies are in trouble. One key reason is that tech companies are spending much more on new innovations than they are earning in revenue by selling their products. All AI apps that we use are being subsidised by people who are funding tech companies. As I have argued in the past, software is not anywhere as profitable as traditional businesses like oil and gas. The most profitable company in the world, the oil giant Saudi Aramco, generates almost as much profit as Apple, Alphabet (Google) and Microsoft combined. And most of Apple's earnings come from its phones, which is old-fashioned manufacturing. Yet Aramco's value as a business is not even one-fourth of the combined market capitalisation of these three tech giants.

However, in the long run, real earnings or profits matter. Tech companies have already tasted what a lack of profits does to share prices when their stocks tanked in 2022. Since then, they have been tightening their belts to improve profitability while simultaneously investing in AI. The only way to do that is to cut wage costs. This is what is making parents think twice before pushing their children into IT courses. It is also why being employed in tech is fast losing its status as a mother-in-law job.

Uttarakhand UCC Bill a welcome step towards gender justice

KP SINGH
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

UTTARAKHAND has become the first state to pass the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill. Article 44 of the Constitution mandates that the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India. The Directive Principle remained in limbo for decades due to various socio-political reasons, even though the Supreme Court reminded the government on several occasions to give effect to the constitutional provision.

The Uttarakhand UCC aims to regulate the laws relating to marriage and divorce, succession, live-in relationships and related matters. It is a comprehensive legislation consisting of 392 clauses in four parts and seven Schedules. Clause 390 provides that all laws, practices, customs or usages in force in Uttarakhand, relating to matters covered under the code, shall cease to have effect within the state in so far as they are inconsistent with any of the provisions contained therein.

It remains to be seen how Clause 390 would be implemented as subject matters of marriage and divorce, infants and minors, wills, intestacy and succession are listed in 'List III — Concurrent List' in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, on which both the Centre and states can make law. The Central Government has already legislated on these subjects. In such a situation, the Uttarakhand UCC would require presidential assent as the state law on a Concurrent List matter cannot override the provisions of a Central legislation.

The code applies to all residents of Uttarakhand who reside in or outside the state boundaries; it shall also apply to all citizens of India who have been residing in Uttarakhand for not less than one year or are beneficiaries of any scheme of the state or Central government applicable in the state.

It is clarified in Clause 2 that the code shall not apply to members of the Scheduled Tribes, as defined in Articles 366(25) and 342 of the Constitution, and persons or group of persons whose customary rights are protected under Part XXI of the Constitution, although it is specifically provided that customs and usages which are unreasonable and against public policy and morality are not to be protected.

INITIATIVE: Uttarakhand has taken the lead in passing the Uniform Civil Code Bill. ANI

Accordingly, practices that discriminate against women, such as triple talaq, *nikah halala*, child marriage, polygamy, polyandry, desertion of wife and non-maintenance of live-in partner, and discriminatory inheritance-related provisions that are against universal civil rights and constitutional values, irrespective of religion, have been done away with by the Uttarakhand UCC. But there is a provision that the ceremonies of marriage may be performed in accordance with religious beliefs, customary rights and practices of the respective communities. The code has been given overriding effect over all religious practices, customs and personal laws.

> The code is a reminder that any religious or social practice which comes into conflict with universal human values cannot be sustained in the name of freedom of religion.

After the enactment of the UCC, registration of all marriages where one party is a resident of Uttarakhand shall be mandatory and its violation shall attract penal consequences with a fine up to Rs 25,000. Even in case of marriages already registered under the marriage registration law of 2010, a declaration to that effect is to be given to the registrar. Similarly, a decree of divorce or nullity passed after the code comes into force is to be registered. It is, however, clarified that non-registration would not invalidate a marriage.

The code contains provisions and procedures relating to the restoration of conjugal rights, judicial separation, void and voidable marriages, divorce and divorce by mutual consent. *Nikah halala* is prohibited and made punishable with imprisonment up to three years and a fine of Rs 1 lakh. However, the penal consequences have been diluted by making it a compoundable offence.

Muslim divorcee women would now be entitled to maintenance in addition to *mahr*. A time-bound procedure to dispose of cases of child custody in matrimonial disputes has been laid down. There is also a detailed procedure about succession to protect and accord coparcenary property rights to women on a par with men.

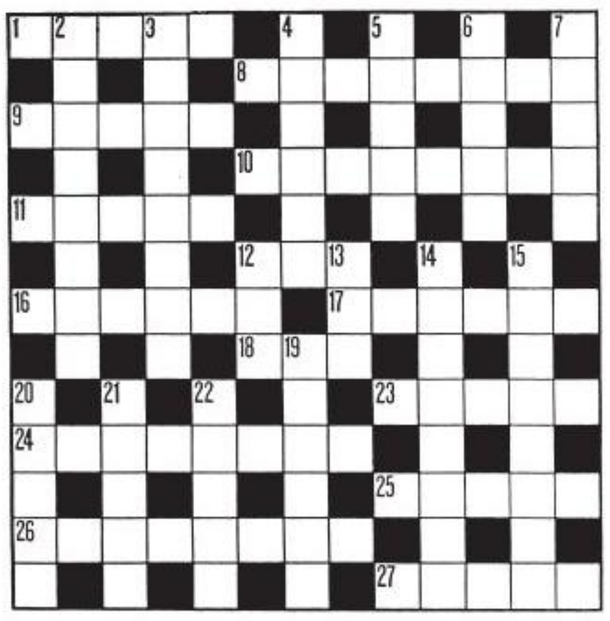
Part 3 of the code contains provisions relating to live-in relationships. Registration of such relations is mandatory and providing false information is punishable with up to six months' imprisonment or a fine up to Rs 25,000 or both; in case couples fail to get themselves registered within a month, they face up to three months' imprisonment or a fine up to Rs 10,000 or both. Similarly, termination of a live-in relationship is to be registered; the maintenance rights of women deserted by a live-in partner are protected.

The eligibility criterion for entering into a live-in relationship is almost the same as that for solemnising/contracting a valid marriage, except the age — men and women aged below 21 can live together as live-in partners with their parents' consent. A live-in partner may opt out by submitting a statement of termination of relationship to the registrar. The registrar is duty-bound to inform the police about the registration and termination of all live-in relationships and a register is to be maintained for this purpose. Registration of live-in relationships is aimed at safeguarding the interests of the female in case of excesses committed by her male partner, but what is missing is the provision for establishing an arbitral authority to redress relationship-related disputes.

The Uttarakhand UCC is a welcome step towards women's empowerment and gender justice. It is a declaration that Indian polity has matured to shun discriminatory social and religious practices and to guarantee gender parity in all matters. It is intriguing, though, that the code is silent on adoption and protecting the rights of the LGBTQ community.

The code is also a reminder that any religious or social practice which comes in conflict with universal human values and a just social order cannot be sustained in the name of freedom of religion.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS
1 Salesman's persuasive talk (5)
8 To attempt to escape (3,3,2)
9 Digress (5)
10 Complete refurbishment (8)
11 Give false notion of (5)
12 Network (3)
16 Affection (6)
17 Curt (6)
18 Nevertheless (3)
23 Intended (5)
24 Trifling irritation (8)
25 Ward off (5)
26 Unevenly balanced (8)
27 Perfect happiness (5)

DOWN
2 As good as secured (2,3,3)
3 Ability to inspire followers (8)
4 A colourless gas used as fuel (6)
5 Express readiness (5)
6 Well done! (5)
7 Long-legged wading bird (5)
12 For what reason (3)
13 A flying mammal (3)
14 Rapid uncontrolled descent (4,4)
15 Protesting angrily (2,2,4)
19 Go beyond (6)
20 Magic formula (5)
21 Clumsy (5)
22 Succession (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Fever pitch, 6 Miss, 10 Mania, 11 Inelegant, 12 Distract, 13 Talon, 15 Prattle, 17 Realist, 19 Elevate, 21 Condemn, 22 Cabal, 24 Bookworm, 27 Underrate, 28 Spell, 29 Teem, 30 Deep-seated.
Down: 1 Fume, 2 Ventilate, 3 React, 4 Imitate, 5 Creator, 7 In all, 8 Set in stone, 9 Restrain, 14 Upper crust, 16 Trawlers, 18 In earnest, 20 Embrace, 21 Close-up, 23 Budge, 25 Waste, 26 Clad.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 10, 2024, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1945
- Magha Shaka 21
- Magha Parvishte 28
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 1, up to 12.48 am
- Variyan Yoga up to 2.53 pm
- Dhanishtha Nakshatra up to 8.34 pm
- Moon enters Aquarius sign 10.02 am
- Gupt Navratre start

FORECAST

SUNSET: SATURDAY 18:06 HRS
SUNRISE: SUNDAY 07:06 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	22	07
New Delhi	24	06
Amritsar	20	05
Bathinda	20	04
Jalandhar	19	05
Ludhiana	21	07
Bhiwani	21	08
Hisar	21	06
Sirsa	22	06
Dharamsala	19	06
Manali	14	01
Shimla	16	06
Srinagar	12	-04
Jammu	23	04
Kargil	04	-07
Leh	03	-11
Dehradun	24	06
Mussoorie	15	06

TEMPERATURE IN °C

bright Punjab Express

From 'Fragile 5' to 'Top 5'

The white paper presented by the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in the Parliament the other day traces the journey of the country from being among the fragile five to top five economies of the world during the past 10 years. It should come as an eye-opener for the Oppostion as well as the general public for the public memory is notoriously short.

The government said that it had followed a counter-cyclical fiscal policy of containing the Budget size during the peak cycle of economic growth to generate adequate fiscal space to handle unforeseen events. This is contrary to the approach of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which expanded Budgets during high-growth (procyclical) periods, thus leading the economy to a "fiscal precipice".

The white paper also highlighted the "economic mismanagement, financial indiscipline, and widespread corruption" during the 10 years of the UPA (2004-14) and how the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's "prudent" fiscal policy had helped to mend the economy from being among the "fragile five" to entering the league of the top five economies in the world.

Stating that the policy paralysis during UPA government's term led to delays in project implementation and cost overruns, the white paper said its period of 10 years was a "lost decade" as the government in power failed to grasp opportunities for technology-led innovation, efficiency, and growth. The white paper said a prudent and calibrated fiscal policy ensured that despite a substantial fiscal stimulus in FY21 after the pandemic hit the nation, the fiscal situation did not get out of hand.

"As soon as the immediate need for the stimulus receded, our government went to work to reclaim the fiscal space. As the economic growth rebounded impressively from FY22 onwards, the government has steadily brought down the gross fiscal, revenue, and primary deficits. The approach has been marked by fiscal prudence and transparency. This is in stark contrast to how the fiscal and revenue deficit was still rising in FY12, three years after the GFC (Global Financial Crisis) in 2008-09," Sitharaman said.

In FY09, the fiscal deficit rose to 6.1 per cent of GDP against 2.6 per cent of GDP FY08 because of the Sixth Pay Commission payout, expenditure on the agricultural debt waiver, oil and fertiliser subsidies, etc. In FY12, the UPA government borrowed 27 per cent more from the market than it had budgeted for, thus taking the fiscal deficit to 5.9 per cent of GDP from the 4.6 per cent of GDP initially estimated.

The white paper, authored by the finance ministry, accused the UPA government of gearing public expenditure towards short-term populist measures and conspicuously neglecting infrastructure and asset creation. This led to capital expenditure as percentage of expenditure (excluding interest payments) halving from 31 per cent in FY04 to 16 per cent in FY14, thereby creating long-term constraints for the economy and compromising its growth potential.

"Combined with the consistent boost to aggregate demand from excessive deficits, it resulted in higher inflation, a higher current account deficit and an overvalued currency, all of which climaxed in 2013 when the Indian rupee buckled under the weight of such imprudent policies," the paper said.

The white paper said the quality of expenditure improved during the NDA era with the compound average growth rate (CAGR) of revenue expenditure declining to 9.9 per cent during FY14-24 from 14.2 per cent during FY04-14 while capital expenditure grew to 17.6 per cent from 5.6 per cent during the same time period. Capital expenditure as percentage of total expenditure (excluding interest payments) in FY24 increased to 28 per cent.

The white paper said the Indian economy had undergone structural reforms since 2014 that had strengthened the macroeconomic fundamentals of the economy.

"The announcement of India's inclusion in JP Morgan's Government Bond Index-Emerging Markets (GBI-EM) is a milestone event ... This will not only help India raise more funds but also increase the investor base for government securities and help India meet the country's growing borrowing needs," it added.

"This government took the issue of leakages very seriously ... transferring LPG subsidies via Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) reduced leakages by 24 per cent," it added. In a statement, R Dinesh, president of Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) said the findings of the white paper reaffirms the Indian economy's robust growth momentum.

SPIRITUAL WORLD

About 50% Indians associate growth, aspirations, and productivity to their dedicated study space, says report

In India, home decor transcends traditional aesthetics, serving as a mirror to cultural values, emotional ties, and the dynamic evolution of living spaces, according to a recent study 'HomeScapes' by Godrej Interio, a business of Godrej & Boyce, the flagship company of the Godrej Group. The study underscores the unique expression of consumers' personalities and values through their choices in home and décor and the intrinsic connection between homes and personal growth.

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According to the study, 25 percent of the respondents prioritise envisioning a personal corner or space when contemplating their initial home purchase, viewing it as a sanctuary for solitary activities and tranquillity. In one of the most interesting findings from the study, over 54 percent of respondents emphasize a direct correlation between their personal development, aspirations, and productivity to their study table and chair. For them, focusing and working efficiently elsewhere is a considerable challenge. Additionally, about 62 percent involve their child when selecting study tables and chairs for their kids' room. Godrej Interio's 'Homescapes' study also reveals interesting insights into the ongoing debate surrounding logic and rationality versus creativity and innovation. It delves into consumers' attitudes in their most intrinsic domain – their homes. It brings attention to a heightened emphasis on functionality and organizational skills, with 28% of the respondents having identified as 'Order Obsessive,' expressing discomfort if their belongings are even slightly rearranged, even unintentionally by a maid during cleaning.

Swapneel Nagarkar, Business Head & Senior Vice President, Godrej Interio said, "The 'HomeScapes' study reveals a deep emotional connection between individuals, their families, and their homes. Our research explores consumers' sentiments about a vital aspect of their lives – their homes as a mirror of their existence. Survey data suggests a shift in focus, as people increasingly prioritise both functionality and aesthetics thus ensuring that their homes are well-organised and welcoming." The survey involved 2,822 respondents residing in seven cities, namely Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Lucknow.

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Embracing the future of fashion

In a celebration of creativity and innovation, the 37th edition of INIFD presents GenNext, a pivotal talent discovery program by LakmeFashion Week in partnership with FDCI, has unveiled its latest batch of four exceptional winning designers. Rohitash Notani (Rosani), Charmee Ambavat (The Terra Tribe), Kriti Greta Singhee (Kriti Greta Singhee), and Shimona Agrawal (Shimona Agrawal) emerged victorious, earning the opportunity to showcase their distinctive collections on the runway of LakmeFashion Week X FDCI, scheduled for the March edition in Mumbai.

Introducing the newest set of GenNext designers, Sunanda Khaitan, Vice President, Lakmesaid, "Embracing the future of fashion begins with the creative minds we discover and foster through the GenNext program at LakmeFashion Week X FDCI. At Lakme, we are constantly in search of what's the next big conversation in beauty and fashion, and this season's GenNext designers represent not only the resilience and creativity of a new era but also our commitment to identifying, nurturing, and empowering young talent who will sculpt the future of global fashion. We are thrilled to spotlight the GenNext winners as they unfold their creativity, in line with Lakme's vision as a fashion-forward beauty brand with product lines and collection themes bringing forth a blend of fresh perspectives and avant-garde styles."

Rohitash Notani, an IED Milan alum, blends conventional masculinity with feminine sensuality in "Anima & Animus," featuring high-end embroideries and workwear fabrics. Charmee Ambavat, a NIFT Mumbai graduate, draws inspiration from African tribes in "Indigene," showcasing versatile designs. Shimona Agrawal, a NIFT Gandhinagar alum, emphasizes sustainability in "Re-imagined for the Modern Soul," crafted from handwoven Banarasi silk. Kriti Greta Singhee, with degrees from NIFT Kolkata and Istituto Marangoni, explores geometric patterns in "Third Space-Sustainable Future" using organic hand-woven silks and Bengal cotton silks.

The announcement is in line with LakmeFashion Week x FDCI's continuing efforts to propel emerging talents onto both national and global stages. Serving as the industry's coveted platform, INIFD Presents GenNext has played a crucial role in identifying and nurturing over 250 designers, including notable names [Rahul Mishra, Kunal Rawal, Masaba Gupta, Ruchika Sachdeva, Ujjawal Dubey among others], who have become paragons of excellence not only in India but also internationally.

Renowned for its commitment to fostering emerging talent, GenNext offers designers invaluable opportunities to refine their skills, providing a gateway for them to claim their well-deserved spotlight in the dynamic world of fashion. As the 37th edition heralds a new chapter, these four talented individuals are poised to make a lasting impact with their winning collections, contributing to the ever-evolving narrative of the Indian fashion landscape.

Like every season, entries were welcomed for the GenNext program across India. The shortlisted designers showcased their collections to a distinguished jury comprising Sunanda Khaitan, Vice President, Lakme; Sabina Chopra, GenNext Mentor; Rochelle Pinto, Head of Editorial Content, Vogue India; Tina Tahiliani Parikh, Executive Director, Ensemble; Kunal Rawal, renowned Indian fashion designer and Jaspreet Chandok, Group Vice President, Reliance Brands Ltd.

Speaking on the GenNext program Jaspreet Chandok, Group Vice President, Reliance Brands Ltd. said, "It brings us immense joy to witness the continued success of our GenNext program, which has consistently nurtured remarkable young talent. For over a decade, the program has played a pivotal role in introducing exceptional designers, many of whom have left a lasting impression on the Indian and global fashion industry. As we welcome the winners of the 37th batch of GenNext designers, we wish for their continued growth and impact on the fashion industry." **IANS**

4 highballs to enjoy this International Scotch Day

Every year on February 8, enthusiasts around the globe raise their glasses to the occasion of International Scotch Day - commemorating the finest of whiskies which has become the ultimate aspirational benchmark for whisky enjoyers in both India and around the world. Made in Scotland using time-honored traditions and techniques refined over generations of distillers, Scotch whisky boasts an unmatched level of craftsmanship that gives it unparalleled complexity and depth.

In 2024, consumers are experimenting with novel ways to enjoy their favorite Scotch in new-age formats - with the whisky highball being among the most popular. This format incorporates soda water or ginger ale, along with ice and a garnish into the Scotch, to create an effervescent drink that is light, and refreshing, and highlights more dimensions of the whisky's flavors.

In the spirit of celebrating how far Scotch has come, here are some whisky highball recipes to enjoy this International Scotch Day:

Ginger Highball

INGREDIENTS:
60ml Scotch Whisky
15ml Lemon Juice
15ml Ginger Syrup
15ml Sugar Syrup
30-60ml Soda

STEPS:
Blend and strain fresh ginger with just enough water to help it blend. Add castor sugar and stir to mix. Ensure the ginger to sugar ratio is 4:3.
Combine all the other ingredients in a highball glass
Fill it with ice and stir till chilled
Top off with more ice and soda.
Garnish with a lemon wedge or wheel

Green Tea Highball

INGREDIENTS:
60ml DEWAR'S 12-Year-Old
5ml Lemon Juice
10ml Sugar Syrup
60ml Green Tea

STEPS:
Take 12 green tea bags steeped in 500ml hot water for not more than 30 seconds. Chill it once ready.
Add the chilled green tea to all the other ingredients in a highball glass
3. Fill it with ice and stir till chilled
Top it off with more ice and soda
Garnish with a pineapple leave or a lime wheel

Tropical Highball

INGREDIENTS:
60ml Scotch Whisky
15ml Lemon Juice
15ml Chili Cinnamon Syrup
30ml Pineapple Juice

STEPS:
For the chilli cinnamon syrup, add 2 toasted Kashmiri chilis and 2 toasted cinnamon sticks to 500ml sugar syrup. Blend the ingredients and strain.
Combine the syrup and all the other ingredients in a chilled highball glass.
Fill it with ice and stir till chilled
Top it off with more ice and soda
Garnish with a pineapple wedge

Beekeepers Highball

INGREDIENTS:
45ml DEWAR'S 12-Year-Old
15ml Lemon Juice
15ml Honey Cinnamon Syrup
30ml Soda

STEPS:
Take honey and water in a 5:4 ratio. Add this solution and toasted cinnamon sticks to a blender. Use 4 cinnamon sticks for every 500ml of honey syrup.
Blend and fine-strain the mixture.
Combine all the ingredients in a highball glass
Fill it with ice and stir till chilled
Add more ice and top up with soda
Garnish with a honey cinnamon tuile

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Put the Squeeze on Unhealthy F&B, GoI

Nudge to cut back on sugar, caffeine intakes

Steadily rising non-communicable lifestyle diseases warrant greater government intervention to inform Indian nutritional choices. Processed food and drinks have internationally been subject to voluntary caps on fat, salt and sugar. Front-of-package labelling has been used to effectively signal health choices, and sin taxes have been deployed to deter consumption. India has a demerit tax on sugary drinks, but is yet to get its manufacturers to cut back on sugar levels prevalent in Europe, the US or even in Singapore. With the incidence of diabetes climbing, India could leverage low penetration and market potential to drive a harder bargain over nutritional standards in packaged food and beverages.

This involves imposing higher thresholds of evidence on claims such as 'energy' and 'super' foods and drinks, and a mezzanine level of statutory warnings over ingredients used to enhance flavour or extend shelf life. Pictorial depictions in packaging cut through the encrypted nutritional information in current package labelling like traffic lights. This becomes even more critical in rural markets with low awareness, which is where most growth is expected. Industry pushback over visual nutritional guidance should not be allowed to defer voluntary or mandatory compliance indefinitely.

The third tack would be to ration intake of substances with established negative side-effects, like caffeine and sleep deprivation, by regulating the serving size. This is far more difficult to execute, however, with business models built around increasing per-capita consumption. Effective intervention would be a blended approach of taxation, improved nutrition signalling and penalising mis-selling. Raising awareness is especially difficult in a multicultural market like India. But the tools that drive greater market penetration are also available to rein in harmful consumption. GoI needs to ratchet up its awareness initiatives in step with growth of consumption of processed food. It could also prevail on producers to dish out healthier offerings.

A Quiet Salute to a Quiet Ex-PM, Ex-MP

With the departure of 91-year-old Manmohan Singh on Thursday from Rajya Sabha — and, for all purposes, political life — the country marks the exit of a figure who managed to hold on to the paradoxical tag of practitioner of 'decent politics'. This was no mean feat in a career that started in academia, moved to policy, and orbited into politics. It was also no mean feat in a cultural terrain where rhetoric-driven OTT politics grew to become not just de rigueur, but laudatory. But Singh's deceptively quiet, abacus-like approach bore bountiful fruits in his stints as RBI governor, finance minister and PM.

In this, there was nothing 'accidental' about Singh's trajectory. What *was*, was his tipping over into the prime minister's seat. As an economist-bureaucrat-politician, Singh's understanding of this trifecta has arguably shaped contemporary India, firming up its belief that 'it's the economy, stupid'. His effective style was based on his innate suspicion of what he deemed as 'conspicuous consumption'. His quiet, incremental approach to see the India-US nuclear civil deal into existence was just one example of both his creditworthiness, as well as his going under-credited by peers and people.

Singh's capabilities were more suited to a world where governance, administration and policy-setting took consensus for granted, and the political flight path already cleared. But like a referee made to stop a game of football too many times on a chaotic field with uncontrollable players, Singh became victim of realpolitik — euphemistically better known as 'coalition compulsions' and 'policy paralysis'. With the ex-PM — very likely the last to have been born in pre-Independence India — now ex-MP, history will judge his quietude as a strength.

JUST IN JEST

When Enforcement Directorate officials rode into the wrong valley

Wrong Turn Taken by Lightheaded Brigade

Tennyson fans know their lines from the poet's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade': 'Cannon to right of them/ Cannon to left of them,/ Cannon in front of them/ Volleyed and thundered…/ Rode the six hundred.' Our Enforcement Directorate (ED) may not be the British light cavalry that charged to its doom in 1854 against the Russian artillery in the Crimean War. But, this week, in Tennyson's words, 'someone had blundered' within the economic law enforcement agency. On February 7, ED officials rushed into the residence of a Sandip Sadhukhan, employee of West Bengal government's building construction department.

This being West Bengal, and ED being an amorphous entity that has, of late, been set loose to enter any suspicious nook and cranny smelling of suspect money, it could have been just another case of 'Soja, beta, nahi toh sarkar ka Gabbar aa jayega'. Except, this light brigade did a heavy-handed job. Greeting (sic) ED officials was Sadhukhan's son, who, after checking the warrant — that charged his father with discrepancy in 100 days' work-related documents — found that the address and police station didn't match the Sadhukhans' residential address. EDiotic as it may sound, no charges — of the light or heavy brigade variety — were pressed against the dreaded enforcement agency. 'This is not America,' a disgruntled neighbour was overheard saying.

As long as Iran's Islamic regime remains in power, India will face political and trade hurdles

Keep a Persian Gulf, India

Saeed Ghasseminejad & Maryam Aslany

The regime still hovers over Iran

Last month, external affairs minister S Jaishankar travelled to Tehran on a critical mission: finding a way to shield Indian exporters from attacks by Iran-backed Houthis in the Red Sea. A day later, Tehran targeted Islamist Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl inside Pakistan in a missile-drone attack. Pakistan retaliated by firing missiles into Iran. New Delhi may see the attack as an opportunity to improve ties with Tehran and open a second front against Pakistan. That would be a mistake.

India needs only to consider the aftermath of the October 7 terrorist attacks by Tehran-backed Hamas in Israel to realise this. That assault has led to a growing chain of military conflicts that negatively affect India's vital national interests in trade, energy and transport.

Here's how Iran's actions and policies are undermining India's interests:

▶ **Trade blocks** Houthi attacks on the Red Sea threaten Indian commerce through that corridor. In 2022, India exported €67 billion worth of goods to the EU, and imported €47.6 billion. Most of this trade goes through the Red Sea. Using other routes would significantly increase transportation and final costs of goods.

▶ **Energy insecurity** The regime in Tehran has directly targeted ships passing through the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman. In one case, an Iranian drone attacked a tanker going from Saudi Arabia to India, putting the latter's energy security at significant risk. The Persian Gulf is a key area of interest to India. Even after increased imports of cheap oil from Russia due to sanctions against Moscow, New Delhi still imports most of its oil from the Persian Gulf.

▶ **Aiming new routes** One of the key aims of the October 7 Hamas attacks was also to disrupt the new trade routes that lie at the heart of India's future economic growth. Offering an alternative to China's BRI, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) will connect India to Europe through Saudi Arabia and Israel. The mega-project depends on the normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The attack ended this process, which was already in an advanced stage.

▶ **Eye on Kabul** Tehran's history of harming India's national interests extends not only to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and West Asia but also to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran played a pivotal role in weakening the US-backed Afghan government, which brought the Taliban back to power. While the Taliban is a threat to Iran's national security, Tehran perceived an Afghan government aligned with the US as an even bigger threat to its interests. So, it denied India the opportunity to have a partner in Kabul. Instead, Tehran promoted a Pakistan-aligned Islamist government.

New Delhi may see the tit-for-tat attacks between Iran and Pakistan as an opportunity to improve ties with Tehran and open a second front against Pakistan. That would be a mistake

▶ **No room in Central Asia** Tehran's aggressive foreign policy, which has brought years of economic sanctions against Iran, has also blocked India's path to Central Asia. Unable to access that crucial region through Pakistan and Afghanistan, India relies on a route through Iran. This route, however, requires significant investment and stability, which is impossible in the context of Tehran's struggle with sanctions and frequent regional disputes.

▶ **Allying with China** Tehran imagines itself as a close ally of China. For Iran, China is not just a trade partner but also a big brother in the former's fight to push the US out of West Asia. Tehran has been keen to invite Beijing into the region to achieve this goal. In 2021, India imported $136 billion of goods from West Asia and North Africa, while its exports were $56 billion. Given the rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi, China's greater influence in the region threatens India's regional interests.

IMEC depends on normalisation of Saudi-Israeli ties. The Hamas attacks ended this process

▶ **Unreliable partner** Under the Islamic regime, Iran has never been — and will never be — a reliable trade partner for India. Given the two nations' historical ties and interests, roles and size, that is a missed opportunity. India's wealthy Parsi community, for instance, has few dealings with an Islamic Republic hostile to its Zoroastrian faith. Iran does not feature among the 50 countries to which Tata Motors, part of a $300 billion Parsi-owned business group, exports cars.

Under a different system of government, Iran could be a reliable energy source for India, a partner in bringing political stability, and a large market for Indian goods and services. Such a government could provide a multi-trillion-dollar economic windfall to India. All the more so because, were Iran to behave as a constructive member of the West Asian community, it could participate in IMEC, whose value would be increased for all. Without the Islamic Republic's sponsorship of international terror, moreover, India and all its partners would be more secure and confident in their cooperation.

As long as the Islamic regime rules over Iran, India will continue to face powerful political and commercial constraints. Luckily for India, the Iranian people have taken to the streets three times over the last five years to bring down the Islamic regime. While New Delhi, like any other nation, has to deal with the Islamic Republic in terms of its interests, it is time to explore what a post-Islamic Republic Iran can look like.

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Get a PPPiece of Innovation Action

Abhilash Agnihotri & Rakesh Basant

With Vikram lander's soft landing near the lunar south pole last year, India became a league of its own. And, yet, it ranks 40th on the Global Innovation Index. Isro-like successes remain isolated. R&D expenditures in India have stagnated at about 0.6% of GDP.

While there is a need to increase public sector spending on R&D, it is often argued that private sector should step up its investments. Paradoxically, while MNCs are increasingly leveraging India as their innovation hub, the broader innovation ecosystem's output leaves much to be desired, and local enterprises lament limited availability of well-trained R&D professionals.

There is limited clarity on the modalities of the Anusandhan National Research Foundation that came into effect on Monday, and the ₹1 lakh crore corpus for research and innovation announced in the interim budget. While these are welcome experiments in innovation financing, publicly supported industry consortia remain largely underutilised.

Arguably, strategic PPPs can be a useful way to attract private investments as well as leapfrog local capacity to innovate. The efficacy of such partnerships in India would depend on the clarity of strategic intent and presence of certain critical elements in the financing, operational, governance and evaluation structures of such arrangements.

PPPs in R&D are formal relationships between public and private actors, where both sides participate in the decision-making process, and co-invest scarce resources like money, personnel, infrastructure and knowledge, to achieve specific science, technology and innovation (STI) objectives. PPPs in strategic areas can help combine complementary capabilities of private and public sectors. They provide a useful mechanism to address market and government failures, as PPPs reduce technological and regulatory uncertainties. Carrying out joint R&D activities can also help diffuse best practices and encourage spillovers.

A consultative process should be leveraged to identify the areas of focus. A sharper focus on pre-competitive projects, where barriers to collaboration are lower, would be desirable. Building trust among partners is also paramount through transparent structuring.

Strategic STI PPPs are typically financed by government, academia and industry equally. Initially, GoI could consider being a major contributor to incentivise private participation. But, in the long run, it should be mindful of not crowding out private investments. A tiered membership structure with additional incentives for Indian firms could promote the participation of large and small firms alike.

Fix the helix

Initially, these partnerships should run for less than three years to ensure agility and build trust. Their success will trigger long-term partnerships to serve national missions.

Operations of these PPPs should be steered by those with appropriate knowledge. Openness to international participation is desirable to enhance competitiveness and create a pool of skilled workforce. MNC R&D centres based in India should be allowed to participate, as their local presence creates potential for knowledge spillovers. Regulatory hurdles for their participation will have to be mitigated.

Nature of activities and infrastructure needs can determine the PPPs to be run virtually, or otherwise. Flexible contractual arrangements, along with transparent sharing and transferring mechanisms of IP generated through PPPs will help minimise potential disputes.

A strong governance framework is critical. Between achieving public goals with private participation, and being swayed towards achieving private goals with public support, these partnerships harbour an inherent tension. Leaderships will need to reconcile this tension. Well-defined distributional mechanisms can help in treating all the stakeholders' interests fairly. GoI must ensure it only orchestrates such arrangements and let PPPs run autonomously.

It is vital to leverage adaptability of PPPs and have regular evaluations to make necessary structural and operational changes as partnerships evolve. If India is to take moonshots, we should pay heed to Vikram Sarabhai's recommendation: 'Where there are major deficiencies in scientific effort in particular areas… special support must be given to scientific groups for task-oriented development projects that are subjected to prior political decision-making.'

While strategic PPPs may not be a panacea, they certainly could be one of the key levers to improve competitiveness of the Indian innovation ecosystem.

Agnihotri is strategic business development lead, Asia-Pacific, Collins Aerospace, and Basant is former professor of economics, IIM-A

Rx Dose of Quality Control Meds

Dinesh Thakur & Prashant Reddy T

As 2023 ended, the health ministry finally notified a new 'Good Manufacturing Practices' (GMP) code, in Schedule M to Drugs and Cosmetics Rules 1945. A draft of this version of Schedule M was first published for consultations in 2018 and appears to have been notified into the law in response to the series of scandals attributed to 'Made in India' medicine. Like previous GMP codes, the new Schedule M aims to lay down procedures to regulate all aspects of drug manufacture to ensure quality standards are followed.

Predictably, some industry organisations, especially those representing SMEs, have warned that the new standards will lead to shutdown of smaller manufacturing units and drug shortages because compliance costs will rise. This old playbook was deployed successfully two decades ago to delay the introduction and dilution of a version of Schedule M first introduced in 2001.

Back then, lobbying was partially successful since it led to GoI carving out several mindless exceptions for older manufacturing units:

▶ Prohibition in Schedule M (2001) against conducting any other manufacturing activity in a facility where drugs were being manufactured was deemed to be not applicable to units licensed before December 11, 2001. This was shocking because the logic of such a prohibition is that drugs must be manufactured in sterile facilities to prevent cross-contamination. This exception has not been replicated in the new version of Schedule M. But it is likely that lobbies are going to pressure GoI to either dilute the new GMP code, or further extend the implementation date for SMEs (December 22).

Not a chill pill

▶ Apart from lobbying, there's the problem of poor legal drafting. For example, this version of Schedule M requires all facilities to have quality-control equipment to conduct testing at different manufacturing stages. Depending on the drug, this equipment could be a high-performance liquid chromatography machine, or gas chromatography machine.

Drug Rules 1945 have, however, always provided an exception to this requirement, which is mentioned in the rules and not Schedule M. For example, Rule 71(4) contains a proviso which states that for quality tests requiring 'sophisticated instrumentation techniques or biological or microbiological methods other than sterility', the drug manufacturer can outsource quality tests to licensed laboratories.

This is a strange exception for an industry where quality can make a difference between life and death. This exception is also why many SMEs do not have the testing equipment. Outsourcing such critical quality tests makes little sense, given the frequency of testing required in the drug manufacturing lifecycle.

More likely than not, SME units that lack such testing equipment ship out final formulations without any testing. This is the only rational explanation for the alarming number of cough syrups that failed quality tests after GoI enacted new rules last year, mandating testing in its laboratories for all syrups meant for export.

If GoI is serious about fixing the quality problem, it should:

▶ Delete the present carve-out in Drug Rules 1945, which allows a manufacturing licence to be granted to pharma manufacturing facilities lacking quality testing equipment.

▶ Even presuming that India does put in place a gold-standard GMP code, there is the question of implementing the new standard by 36 drug controllers in states and UTs. The average citizen has no way of holding these officials accountable, since they have no access to official inspection reports about the compliance of pharma manufacturing facilities with the GMP code in Schedule M.

This is unlike the US, where the regulator is legally required to publish all inspection reports of all licensed facilities within 30 days. Transparency helps hold the regulator accountable and informs procurement agencies about the track record of specific drug manufacturers.

Although GoI is steadfast in its refusal to acknowledge that Indian drugs have been responsible for scandals in the last two years, its trading partners have not lost sight of the problem.

▶ Gambia has imposed a new mandatory pre-shipment testing requirement on Indian medicines.

▶ Nigeria, a big market, has heightened scrutiny of drug imports from India.

▶ The US, in the face of drug shortages attributed to quality problems with some Indian manufacturing facilities, is considering onshoring more drug manufacturing.

GoI needs to be serious in guaranteeing India has a gold-standard GMP, implemented transparently to protect public health and the industry's reputation.

The writers are co-authors of The Truth Pill: The Myth of Drug Regulation in India

THE SPEAKING TREE

Idols and Idolatry

NARAYANI GANESH

Cambridge Dictionary says, 'An idol can be a religious image or a person who people admire and maybe even seem to worship. A statue of a Hindu god is a religious idol, but Madame Curie is an idol to aspiring scientists.' We are familiar with the terms K-pop idols, American Idol, Indian Idol — all referring to popular celebrities who are icons and role models, adept at music or acting, or any other form of entertainment. A popular leader or public figure who inspires others is also called an idol. However, to refer to images and statues of gods and goddesses as idols, could carry with it a negative connotation.

This is because all Abrahamic religions use the term idol and idolatry to denote 'that which is worshipped but which is other than god'. That is, perhaps, alluding to a false god, which is why most orthodox Christians and Muslims shun any kind of worship that involves praying to an 'idol'. In the Hindu way of life, any pratima, image or statue representing one's ishta devta, favourite god or goddess, is meant as a means to focus and concentrate either via prayer, chanting, puja or other rituals, to help centre the mind to seek the spiritual path. It is a positive tool or means toward achieving one's spiritual goals. It is easier to focus one's attention on a tangible object rather than imagine it in abstraction. Although Brahmn, universal consciousness, is formless, it is in its various manifestations in different forms that prove attractive to the seeker. Hence, we need to rid the stigma associated with 'idol worship' and view this practice in a positive way.

BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Buying Stationery

Going into a stationery shop and 'going crazy' is a joy steeped both in anticipation and childish creativity. The moment you step into the store, you're greeted by the scent of fresh paper and ink, and other real and imagined aromas from the ends of erasers to the fruitiness of crayons.

And your pleasure is tangible. Each item on the shelves — from the vibrant array of sketch pens to the neatly stacked notebooks — holds a promise of potential of a happy scrawl.

Choosing stationery is an intimate experience. The weight of a pen, texture of a notebook's pages, precision of a ruler — these details matter. They're not just tools but extensions of our thoughts, ideas and taste. When you find the perfect piece, it's as if it was made just for you.

Moreover, stationery is a gateway to our imagination. A blank notebook can become a journal, a novel, a sketchbook. It invites us to fill its pages with our thoughts, dreams and creativity. Much like life.

Buying stationery is no simple purchase. It's a celebration of the joy of using things, filling up space, leaving many marks on blank pages.

Chat Room

Cheat Days End Soon for Exams

Apropos the Edit, 'Demo Dividend Only When Cheating Stops' (Feb 9), fairness and credibility are meant to be non-negotiable aspects of any competitive examination. Instances of malpractices and exam paper leaks regularly disrupt competitive examinations and the process of recruitment for various government jobs. Irregularities in competitive exams are always a big challenge for the bright candidates. In this context, the new law to prevent fraudulent practices in competitive exams will act as a deterrent, with a fine of ₹1 crore and jail term up to 10 years for the offenders. It is hoped that the new law will prevent organised cheating and strengthen the credibility of all types of exams.

K S RAO
Thane

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

WHATEVER AFFECTS ONE DIRECTLY, AFFECTS ALL INDIRECTLY.

— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

LET THEM LIVE

Uttarakhand code is flawed. Its measures on live-in relationships violate rights of citizens, they need to go

THE FRAMING OF a common set of personal laws to regulate marriage and its annulment, adoption, succession and inheritance across religions in a diverse country is necessarily a fraught exercise. It has been complicated further, in recent years, by the insularity of identity politics and its demands for an imposed top-down homogenisation. This is why discussions on Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code (UCC), passed by the state assembly on Wednesday, that will spur similar legislation in other BJP-ruled states — common civil code being one of BJP's three "core" issues, along with the Ayodhya Ram temple and abrogation of Article 370, with the latter two accomplished — necessitated a layered consideration of the task at hand. It also required great sensitivity, to ensure that the concerns of minorities are heard, and heeded. In its espousal of equal property rights for men and women, striking down the concept of illegitimacy for children and raising the age for marriage for both men and women, the UCC shows foresight, even if these measures leave loose ends. Where it fails, completely and strikingly, is in its twisted vision on relationships that extend beyond marriage. In that, its policy framework shows a distressing lack of inclusivity and an unprecedented intrusion into the private lives of individuals by the state.

The attempt to institutionalise live-in relationships — interpreted by the Bill as a "relationship between a man and a woman" who "cohabit in a shared household through a relationship in the nature of marriage..." — through compulsory registration, shows a moralising highhandedness that arrogates to the state the power to police citizens' "bad intentions". Applicable to those living in Uttarakhand as well as residents of Uttarakhand elsewhere in the country, and with provisions of penalty, including jail term, for a failure to register the initiation and end of such relationships, it puts all couples at risk. A state official has argued that this is a safety measure to prevent heinous crimes committed in live-in relationships. That's a ridiculous argument — hard cases make bad law and, anyway, the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita has enough provisions to address crime in this context.

In an election year, the political messaging behind the UCC is hard to ignore. Yet, the government needs to, first of all, listen to itself. The dissonance between the ham-handed provisions of the Uttarakhand UCC and the Narendra Modi government's repeated stress on youth- and women-led development is jarring. As recently as December 2023, the PM had spoken of four "castes" that mattered the most: Poor, youth, women and farmers. At the launch of Viksit Bharat@2047, he reiterated that "Yuva shakti is both the agent of change and also the beneficiaries of change". The provisions of the Uttarakhand UCC are out of step with that vision. The right of two consenting adults to decide if they wish to live together — without being married — is a foundational principle of a free society. It is liberating and empowering for women — and men — as they create their own safe personal spaces. The Uttarakhand law yokes their privacy, choice and freedom to a state-determined notion of acceptability. The UCC in Uttarakhand must be reconsidered urgently — as a first step, Section 378 that sets the terms for live-in relationships, needs to go.

EVERYONE IN

Enabling persons with disabilities to more easily access the cinema experience is a step in the right direction

EIGHT YEARS AFTER a landmark piece of legislation enshrined the rights of all persons with disabilities (PwDs) "to participate in recreational activities equally with others", the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, on January 8, issued its draft "Guidelines of Accessibility Standards in the Public Exhibition of Feature Films in Cinema Theatres for Persons with Hearing and Visual Impairment". The guidelines, for which stakeholder comments are invited till February 15, constitute another welcome step towards ensuring that an experience that most movie buffs take for granted can be accessed by a section of Indians who continue to be largely excluded from it. They carry forward the spirit of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016.

According to estimates of the World Health Organisation, approximately 84 million Indians are deaf and hard of hearing and 75 million are blind and visually impaired. There has long been a demand for making the movie-going experience more accessible to them. Efforts by organisations, such as the Delhi-based NGO Saksham, and a handful of willing collaborators in the industry, like actor-producer Aamir Khan, have resulted in some films in the last couple of decades, such as *Dangal* and *Munnabhai MBBS*, having features like audio description, subtitles and closed captions. The draft guidelines require producers to deliver two versions of a film for certification by the CBFC, including one with accessibility features enabled, and call on theatres to schedule special shows for PwDs and the use of special equipment and mobile apps. Such steps can help make accessibility the norm as is the case in countries such as the US and UK. In the UK, theatres have seats into which a visually impaired viewer's headphones may be plugged so that she can hear the audio description of the film being played.

In December 2022, the Supreme Court formed a committee to make the court more disabled-friendly and has recently released a handbook for combating stereotypes about PwDs. Last year, the government made it mandatory for digital offerings to meet the standards set under the RPwD Act. Enabling PwDs to more easily access and savour one of India's most beloved art forms, a globally exported cultural product and significant source of soft power — cinema — is yet another step in the right direction.

A MESSI THING

A no-show escalates into a global row. It's just another day in the life of a mega-star

HALF THE WORLD worships the five foot seven man in the pink jacket, leaning against the side of the wall in the Inter Miami dugout, in the exhibition game against Hong Kong XI. It seems as if the whole of Hong Kong has come to the stadium, to get a glimpse of Lionel Messi, arguably the greatest footballer ever. Every second, the spectators pray for him to stride onto the pitch and dazzle them. But he doesn't. He warms his heels on the bench for the duration of the game. The crowd can bear it no longer. Messi is booed. Refunds for ticket demanded. The Chinese government intervenes and demands a replay where Messi would play.

A "no show" had escalated into a global hellfire. Miami's coach Gerardo Martino would later say that the Argentinian was unfit. Messi apologised, but the fire still rages. It's unlikely that Messi would have been booed anywhere in the world. Even in Brazil, the land of his country's bitter football rivals, or in Madrid, the home of El Clasico antagonists Real Madrid in his Barcelona days, he would not have been subject to such unkind behaviour. But Messi would know that all that is part of being Messi, the price of his excellence and fame. He would know, from experience, how cruel and fickle the world of fans is. It took him decades to win the love of his own countrymen, who regarded him as an outsider because he never played professional football in Argentina, joining Barcelona's La Masia Academy when he had barely reached adolescence.

Messi is neither the first celebrity to be booed, he will not be the last. Closer home, Sachin Tendulkar was jeered when he got out cheaply in a Test against England at the Wankhede in Mumbai, his home. He would return to a hero's welcome again. That's the nature of fandom. So if Messi ever returns to Hong Kong, he would receive a grand welcome, and he would hold no grudge either. Two decades of being a sporting celebrity have taught him better than to do that.

A very flawed code

Beneath veneer of reform, Uttarakhand's UCC is a bill passed in haste without due public feedback

BINA AGARWAL

ON THE SURFACE, Uttarakhand's UCC Bill (herewith U-UCC), passed without public consultation or debate, appears to be a progressive document on some counts, such as succession/inheritance, even while being deeply problematic on other counts, such as its clauses on "live in" relationships. But, delving deeper, even the inheritance rules have serious flaws and silences.

The U-UCC has simplified inheritance rules to make them gender equal on all counts, doing away with prior distinctions between separate and coparcenary joint family property (JFP) in Hindu law, and the unequal shares for women under Muslim law. It thus deceptively appears to be the kind of "gender equal" code that many women's rights scholars and activists have been suggesting.

So what is the problem? It is multi-fold. First, take women's shares: Hindus (along with Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists) are governed today by the Hindu Succession Amendment Act 2005 (HSAA 2005), applicable across India. For those earlier governed by *Mitakshara* (covering over 80 per cent of Indians), the inheritance law differentiates between separate property and coparcenary joint family property. In the latter, the HSAA 2005 grants both sons and daughters (married or unmarried) equal rights by birth that cannot be willed away by fathers. This gives daughters protection from being disinherited due to male bias, at least for joint property, even if separate property were willed away to sons.

Under the U-UCC, however, all property can be willed away. Given biases against endowing daughters with property, even the limited protection they had will thus be lost. The right way forward would have been for the U-UCC to restrict testamentary rights on a part of the property, so that daughters could inherit at least something intestate. Several European countries have restricted testamentary rights.

> Tribals are today subject to gender-unequal customary laws in most states (possible exception being largely matrilineal Meghalaya, which favours women over men). Leaving out tribal communities from a system of codified law is an opportunity forgone.

Two other points are notable. One, now class 1 heirs (those who are the first order of inheritors) include not only the intestate's son, daughter, widow and mother (as under HSAA 2005), but also the intestate's father (51:6). Both parents are entitled to one share "together". This means that the mother will get half of what she would have got under HSAA 2005. Two, a widow or widower of any predeceased relative of an intestate loses the right to inherit if s/he remarries. This is both unfair and regressive, since the person (say, a daughter-in-law) would have contributed to the intestate's family well-being prior to re-marriage. Simply remarrying cannot justify a disqualification. The HSAA 2005 does not do so.

For Muslim women, the U-UCC at one level brings gains, as it promises equal shares to daughters and sons, whereas under the law currently applicable (the Muslim Personal Law Shariat Application Act 1937), women get half the property shares of men, and their rights in agricultural land are subject to discriminatory land reform laws. However, the Sharia restricts testamentary rights, assuring women of at least some property and protection against male bias. The U-UCC provides no such protection, apart from the likely resistance from Muslims to implementing a law so contrary to the Sharia.

For Christian women, the widow who would have received half the intestate's property will get less under the U-UCC, since the property will be shared equally with children. Second, take religion and type of property. For Hindus, the U-UCC creates a conundrum. Many families hold land, houses, and even businesses as coparcenary JFP. What will happen to this property? Will it be de-recognised and partitioned off? And what about businesses registered under the Hindu Undivided Family (HUF), which is recognised as a legal entity under Indian tax law, receives tax benefits, and is defined on the basis of Hindu personal law. The U-UCC ignores this issue altogether. How will Hindu business families in Uttarakhand, who have HUF property, react?

For Muslims, the U-UCC totally ignores the specifications on which eligible heirs and inheritance shares are decided under the Sharia. The latter recognises a complex order of heirs, depending on the presence or absence of particular categories of relatives. This order is quite different from the simple order listed in the U-UCC. Moreover, the Sharia draws from the *Koran*. Some 14 per cent of Uttarakhand's population is Muslim. The proposed changes thus have considerable potential to cause inter-religious divisiveness and conflict.

Third, take tribals: The U-UCC leaves them out of its purview. Tribals are today subject to gender-unequal customary laws in most states (possible exception being largely matrilineal Meghalaya, which favours women over men). Leaving out tribal communities from a system of codified law is an opportunity forgone.

Finally, the U-UCC, if ratified by the President of India, will become the law in that state, presumably overriding central government laws. If every state were to similarly enact its own UCC, then we will have 28 different UCCs — contradicting any claim to a "uniform" civil code for India.

Written with inadequate examination of existing laws and rights, and passed in haste without due public feedback, the U-UCC has created more confusion than it has offered solutions.

The writer is professor of Development Economics, GDI, University of Manchester; also affiliated to IEG (Delhi)

BITs IN PIECES

Forward-looking approach to Bilateral Investment Treaties will attract foreign capital

ARUSH KHANNA

WHILE PRESENTING THE interim Union budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stated that India will be negotiating Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) with its trade partners to boost the inflow of foreign direct investment. This announcement comes at a time when India's bilateral treaties have dried up, more so, since the adoption of the Model BIT in 2016.

BITs are agreements between two countries for the reciprocal promotion and protection of investments in each other's territories by individuals and companies. It was in the mid-'90s that BITs were initiated by the Indian government. The pretext was to offer favourable conditions and treaty-based protection to foreign investors and investments.

The first BIT signed by India was with the UK on March 14, 1994. The BIT regime gained attention in the year 2010 with the settlement of the first-ever investor treaty claim filed against India, and in 2011, when India suffered its first adverse award in a dispute arising out of the Australia-India BIT — *White Industries v Republic of India* — where the government was ordered to pay $4.1 million by the International Chamber of Commerce. By 2015, there were 17 known BIT claims contested by India. The most prominent of these was the one involving Cairn Energy Plc, a British oil and gas company, which secured a $1.2 billion award against the Indian government in an investor-state dispute.

Given the burden that was being levied on the public exchequer, the government was compelled to revisit the 1993 BIT model. This led to the adoption of the 2016 model BIT resulting in the government terminating 68 of the 74 treaties it had executed until 2015 with a request to renegotiate terms based on the revised text.

> In 2021, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs made several recommendations to revisit the existing BIT regime. This included the timely settlement of disputes through pre-arbitration consultations and negotiations. It has also called for the development of local expertise in the field of investment arbitration to not only ensure good representation in investor-state disputes but also to ensure timely review of treaties to align with the global best practices.

The adoption of the 2016 model was seen more as a knee-jerk protectionist measure rather than a nuanced and calibrated approach to encouraging foreign investment. The well-recognised doctrines of public international law such as "fair and equitable treatment" and "most favoured nation" were conspicuous by their absence. Moreover, the 2016 model BIT (Chapter IV) provided that an investor must exhaust local remedies before taking recourse to international arbitration.

Given the extant situation, it is not surprising that India is finding it difficult to re-negotiate terms with other countries which is creating an impact of FDI. According to government data, FDI equity inflows in India declined 24 per cent to $20.48 billion in April-September 2023. The total FDI — which includes equity inflows, reinvested earnings and other capital — contracted 15.5 per cent to $32.9 billion during the period under review against $38.94 billion in April-June 2022.

It is not without reason that India is making a significant departure from the 2016 model as it endeavours to conclude a free trade agreement (FTA) with the UK — an endeavour which has now seen over 14 rounds of negotiations. A major stumbling block in these negotiations has been in relation to the settlement of disputes and the proposed FTA is likely to dispense with the requirement of exhausting local remedies by providing a mechanism for timely settlement of disputes through international arbitration.

In 2021, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs made several recommendations to revisit the existing BIT regime. This included the timely settlement of disputes through pre-arbitration consultations and negotiations. It has also called for the development of local expertise in the field of investment arbitration to not only ensure good representation in investor-state disputes but also to ensure timely review of treaties to align with the global best practices. India's ranking in ease of contract enforcement is still abysmally low at 163 out of 190 and therefore, it is critical that these recommendations are implemented in letter and spirit.

Robust international trade and stable investments will be critical to India's pursuit of a $5-trillion economy. A progressive approach to BITs will be an important component to attract and sustain long-term foreign investments. The government's renewed push is a step in the right direction. However, it must do away with its one-size-fits-all approach, while paving the way for rapid yet sustainable growth in cross-border flows.

The writer, a lawyer, is partner at Numen Law Offices

INDIAN EXPRESS

Maqbool Butt to be hanged tomorrow

FEBRUARY 10, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

TERRORISM THREAT

THE GOVERNMENT IS concerned over reports from intelligence agencies of a spurt in the activities of extremists belonging to the Sikh Students Federation. The reports that Pakistan might send trained terrorists and infiltrators into Jammu and Kashmir and other parts of the country, including Delhi, to carry on subversive activities are also causing grave concern to the government.

BUTT TO BE HANGED

MAQBOOL BUTT WAS moved to phansi kothi (death row) from VIP ward number one amidst tight security. The warrant for his hanging was issued by a special judge under the Enemy Agents Ordinance in Jammu following a rejection of Butt's mercy plea to the President. The special judge said: "Maqbool Butt be hanged from neck till he be dead, at 7.30am on February 11, at Tihar jail."

HISTORIC SPACE FLIGHT

INDIA WILL TAKE a giant stride on April 22 when the first Indian cosmonaut will undertake a space journey from Baikonur cosmodrome. India has tentatively chosen Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma for the historic flight, but the final choice will be known only a week prior to the commencement of the space odyssey. Another candidate is Wg Cdr Ravish Malhotra.

CM'S REASSURANCE

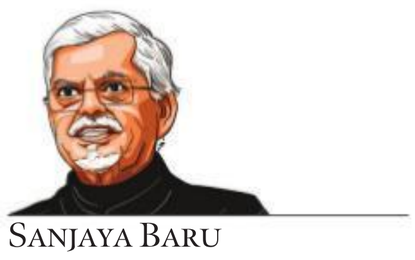
SIKKIM CHIEF MINISTER Nar Bahadur Bhandari left Delhi for Gangtok confident that he had convincingly demonstrated his majority support to Mrs Indira Gandhi and the Congress (I) high command. After a meeting with Mrs Gandhi, the chief minister sounded as if he had weathered the crisis created by 12 of his party MLAs, who signed a memorandum demanding his removal. "I will be the chief minister till the (Assembly) elections," he declared.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"A dragon soars in the sky, but China's development must remain grounded, a truth deeply understood by all Chinese people. 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and is a crucial year for achieving the goals and tasks of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25)." **— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA**

A political ratna

P V Narasimha Rao had to wait for 33 years after 1991 to secure national honour. On politicisation of Bharat Ratna, Modi government has proved no different from others



SANJAYA BARU

C R Sasikumar

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi has devalued the country's highest national honour, the Bharat Ratna, by the manner in which he has sought to award it in the last months of his 10-year tenure. He is not the first PM, to be sure, to have politicised a national honour. However, with his weekly announcements in the run-up to an election, he has made the politicisation blatant.

Consider the five persons named week after week in this past month — Karpoori Thakur, Lal Krishna Advani, Charan Singh, P V Narasimha Rao and M S Swaminathan. If they were all regarded as worthy of the honour, they could all have been named on the very first Republic Day of the Modi government in 2015. After all, the achievements they are credited with go a long way back. In any case, all five names could have been announced on the eve of this year's Republic Day. Given the manner in which these names have been announced, it is possible there could be more names in the pre-election pipeline. Why not a Bharat Ratna to Biju Patnaik, N T Rama Rao, H D Deve Gowda and J Jayalalithaa — all leaders of political parties that are potential allies?

Naming Narasimha Rao now and not during the year of his birth centenary in 2021, when the Telangana state legislature unanimously passed a resolution seeking the honour for Telangana's tallest political leader and a PM who made history turning India and the Indian economy around, smacks of political opportunism. In 2021, the electoral dividend would have been marginal. Today, it is perhaps hoped there would be more, as with Karpoori Thakur and Charan Singh.

India has had many PMs but all have not made history. If Jawaharlal Nehru deserved his Ratna as India's first PM and Indira Gandhi for the creation of Bangladesh, Narasimha Rao had no option but to name Rajiv Gandhi, but he himself richly deserved the honour. It was Rao's political leadership of India's economic turnaround and subsequent rise that laid the foundations of a truly New and Rising India. He has had to wait for 33 years after 1991 to secure this national honour. For his part, Prime Minister Rao was the only PM to name an industrialist as Bharat Ratna when he named J R D Tata in January 1992. JRD's choice was significant not only because he was the first and only business leader to be so honoured but also because it was New Delhi's policy signal to Bombay in the wake of Rao's "New Economic Policies" and the liberalisation of the economy. His other two choices were Maulana Azad and Satyajit Ray.

The Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, is the one award that the President and Prime Minister have the power to personally name an individual for. There is a procedure for the selection of all other Padma awardees. A group of officials and non-officials, the latter being regarded as "reliable" by the government of the day, sit for days to put together a list of all Padma awardees. The President and PM can suggest names to this committee of officials before their list is forwarded to the PM for approval and subsequent forwarding to the President. This procedure has been made more elaborate over the past decade with the public at large being invited to name a person for a Padma "through proper channel".

There have been instances when the President took the initiative to select a name for the highest honour. The first such case was when in 1955 President Rajendra Prasad chose to name Prime Minister Nehru. Some may well argue that it was President Prasad who first politicised the award by naming an incumbent PM. Incidentally, since the announcement of the award and its handing over is by the Rashtrapati, Prasad had to wait till he was no longer Rashtrapati for Prime Minister Nehru to name him.

Nehru himself set a good precedent by giving the first few awards to persons of scholarship, barring the very first one to C Rajagopalachari. Nehru's jewels were physicist C V Raman, engineer M Visvesvaraya, Indologist P V Kane, educationist, social reformer and fighter for women's rights D G Karve, Gandhian P D Tandon and the philosopher S Radhakrishnan. The first overt politicisation of the honour that raised eyebrows was the naming of President V V Giri by Indira Gandhi in 1975. He was a prominent labour leader before becoming President but one could argue he was not in the same category of eminence as the first 10 awardees.

Perhaps the first time the Bharat Ratna became purely political was when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi honoured her former party President and Congress Party leader from Tamil Nadu, K Kamaraj. Kamaraj was undoubtedly a popular politician and a genial person, but his greater contribution was to his party rather than the country. Indira Gandhi redeemed herself in her second term naming Mother Teresa and the Gandhian Acharya Vinoba Bhave. After her, Rajiv Gandhi blotted the record further naming M G Ramachandran posthumously.

> Consider the five persons named week after week in this past month — Karpoori Thakur, Lal Krishna Advani, Charan Singh, P V Narasimha Rao and M S Swaminathan. If they were all regarded as worthy of the honour they could all have been named on the very first Republic Day of the Modi government in 2015. After all, the achievements they are credited with go a long way back. In any case, all five names could have been announced on the eve of this year's Republic Day. Given the manner in which these names have been announced, it is possible there could be more names in the pre-election pipeline.

While Modi is not the first PM to politicise the Bharat Ratna, in recent years his predecessors have tried to salvage the honour's reputation. Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee made stellar choices naming M S Subbulakshmi, C Subramaniam, Jayaprakash Narayan, Amartya Sen, Gopinath Bordoloi, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Lata Mangeshkar and Ustad Bismillah Khan. Both Vajpayee and Rao steered clear of naming politicians for political benefit. Manmohan Singh followed their example, naming Bhimsen Joshi, Sachin Tendulkar and scientist C N R Rao.

Short-term PMs like Chandrashekhar used the opportunity to correct certain political distortions naming B R Ambedkar and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel posthumously. His decision to name Morarji Desai can be contested, but that of naming Nelson Mandela, the only non-Indian to be so honoured, was a wise one. That Patel and Ambedkar had to wait so long also underscores the politicisation of the honour. For all his pretensions to be different, Modi has been no different than the Gandhis in choosing his Bharat Ratnas. While Vajpayee and Madan Mohan Malaviya were great citizens deserving of the honour, and Bhupen Hazarika was a great artiste, Nanaji Deshmukh and Pranab Mukherjee were questionable political choices.

The writer was member, National Security Advisory Board (1999-2001) and Advisor to the Prime Minister of India

He who rules the sea

With global power axis shifting to the Indo-Pacific, India is assuming a prominent role in addressing maritime concerns in Indian Ocean region

RAM RAJYA
BY RAM MADHAV

ANGUS MADDISON, RENOWNED British historian, in his monumental work *The World Economy: Historical Statistics* (2003), argued that India had been the largest economy in the world in the first millennium with a share of almost 33 per cent of the world's GDP. It began to decline with external invasions and colonisation and touched a low point during the British era in the 18th and 19th century.

Some economists concluded that this record performance of the Indian economy in the first millennium, closely followed by China during the same period, was due to its population size. However, what many didn't take into account was the domination of Indian rulers over the oceans around them at that time.

"He who rules on the sea will shortly rule on the land also," Hayreddin Barbarossa, admiral of the Ottoman Navy was famously quoted as telling emperor Suleiman. It perfectly applied to India of the first millennium, when the dominant Hindu rulers had developed powerful merchant and military navies and conquered the oceans around the peninsula. They established trade with the Arab lands in the West and ventured into South China Sea territories, crossing the Malayan Peninsula in the East.

From the earliest sea traders of south India like Manigramam Chettis and Nanadesis to the latter-day South Indian kings like the Andhras, Pallavas and Cholas, they all had made significant strides into the oceans. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, an authoritative work on statecraft written in the fourth century BCE, talks about the functions of officers like port commissioners and harbour masters, highlighting the importance attached to maritime activity in ancient India. The Board of Shipping was one of the six important departments of the Mauryan empire. Fa-Hien, a Chinese traveller, wrote in 415 AD that the ship that took him from Ceylon to Sri Vijaya (present-day Indonesia) had 200 merchants who professed the "brahminical religion".

India's economic decline coincided with its decline in naval power. The first millennium was more about trade as there was not much challenge from the seas. But things changed in the second millennium when European powers like the Portuguese, Dutch, French and finally the British conquered the seas. The Portuguese were the first to declare themselves as the "Lords of the Sea" and reached Indian shores by the 14th century. Building a navy to secure the coastline became imminent for the first time for Indian rulers, especially on the western coast. The Zamorins of Kerala were the first to respond, followed a century later by the Marathas. Between them, they were able to control the coast from Bombay to Calicut for three centuries.

Unfortunately, the British, who were well-known seafarers, never bothered to develop a strong blue-water presence during their two-century rule over India. The Royal Indian Navy that they established in the early 19th century was small and inconsequential for a country of India's size. They focused more on mobilising armies from local princes in their war efforts during World Wars I and II. This lack of attention to the seas, sadly, continued after Independence too, with the governments giving greater priority to land-based warfare, completely neglecting the oceans and their potential for the country. The result was that in areas like shipbuilding and naval vessels, India remained a laggard power in the last seven decades. As maritime competition between states picks up momentum, India remains at number 15 in maritime shipping. The Indian Navy has less than 200 combat vessels as against 400 of America and 500 of China.

Interestingly, the first to alert India about the importance of the Indian Ocean for its future was a renowned diplomat K M Panikkar, who served as India's ambassador to China and France. "So far as India is concerned, it should be remembered that the peninsular character of the country and the essential dependence of its trade on maritime traffic give the sea a preponderant influence on its destiny," he argued in his book *India and the Indian Ocean* (1945). His warnings fell on deaf ears. Indian leadership failed to fully appreciate the importance and potential of the region. Although the Indian Ocean Rim Association was formed in 1997 at the insistence of Nelson Mandela of South Africa, the Indian response to it was lukewarm while its focus remained largely Westward.

As the US and European powers like Russia, Britain, France and Germany battled it out through World Wars and the Cold War, the Pacific-Atlantic region emerged as the epicentre of global power politics in the last century. But the dawn of the new century brought new realities. The global power axis has shifted away from the Pacific-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific in India's neighbourhood now.

Indo-Pacific is a geo-political construct, whereas the Indian Ocean is a natural region. It is home to more than three dozen nations. From the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca, this vast expanse of water is the world's third-largest ocean covering over 74 million square kilometres.

For India, the Indian Ocean is the lifeline. Eighty per cent of its external trade and 90 per cent of the energy trade happens through these ocean lines. Additionally, the Indian Ocean maritime trade routes are the crucial supply chains managing almost 70 per cent of the world's container traffic.

Moreover, the Indian Ocean, the only ocean to be named after a country, is not just a maritime geography but a civilisation. Over millennia, its waves reached the shores of many countries carrying India's cultural and civilisational imprint and created a vast sphere of Indic civilisational influence.

Realising the natural goodwill that India enjoys in this region, once described as the "British Lake", the Indian government has taken several proactive steps towards it. The 7th Indian Ocean Conference, taking place at Perth in Australia is one such initiative. It seeks to bring together nations of the region to address the non-traditional challenges that are common to all of them, such as climate change, ocean levels, natural disasters and supply chain disruptions, as against the traditional security-related challenges that divide and compel countries to take sides.

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the RSS

If the sun doesn't shine

Meeting renewable energy goals will require developing storage capacities

RAKESH K SINGH AND SUDIP SURAL

INDIA ASPIRES TO become GHG neutral, or Net Zero , by 2070 through its nationally determined contributions (NDC) to the Paris Pact. Renewable energy (RE) will be a key driver of this mission — 500 giga-watt (GW) of RE is targeted to be added by 2030. The country has added 72 GW of solar and 44 GW of wind as a part of this target. These have typically been characterised by long term 25-year power purchase agreements (PPAs) with state discoms. Commercial and industrial (C&I) capacities of 32 GW have also been added.

This remarkable growth in RE capacities has been helped with a must run status (evacuation of power from solar power plants and wind power plants should not be stopped except for safety related reasons) accorded to such energy projects. Favourable policies such as late payment surcharge, inter-state transmission system charge waiver and renewable purchase obligations have also helped. The reduction in capital costs has played a major role, as has higher competition amongst IPPs in the bidding process accompanied with entry of foreign investors.

However, 500 GW could be out of reach without robust storage capacities and deeper power exchanges. After the Covid pandemic ended in FY22, power demand has picked up and peak deficits have been growing, especially during the summer months. In addition to variations across seasons, deficits have also varied across times of the day — peaking primarily during evenings. Peak demand is expected to grow from 240 GW in FY24 (year to date) to 285 GW in FY28 with peak deficits growing to almost 10-15GW by that year, primarily during evenings.

With discoms reluctant to go with must run RE, plain vanilla solar or wind with long term PPAs are increasingly being seen as the way to fulfil demands, especially during peak deficit hours. Recent bid announcements reflect the demand pattern — bids of increasing complexity as generators have been asked to do hourly demand matching to make RE comparable to firm and dispatchable sources (electricity repositories that can be programmed at the request of power grid operators, according to market needs). In some of these bids, demand fulfilment has to be at least 90 per cent (comparable to coal projects). Penalties for not meeting these demand patterns are high with 1.5 times the tariff for shortfalls.

The bids allow for excess power generated to be sold on the exchange to help IPPs bid at a lower tariff. For instance, in the recent firm and dispatchable RE (FDRE) bids invited by SECI, generators are required to match round the clock (RTC) demand of discoms on a 15-minute basis — demand varies across the day and across the months. Addressing this need requires a combination of solar and wind coupled with storage — either battery or pumped hydro. Storage capacities will be central to maintaining grid stability as we build more RE capacities.

To meet the time of the day demand in these bids, generators may have to combine solar and wind and manage intermittencies. They will need storage facilities to meet demand when wind and solar resources are not available. Accordingly, generators will over-size the projects so that the excess generation during the solar and wind hours can be stored. The choice of storage will depend on the demand profile of the discoms. Pumped hydro can be extremely useful especially because its capital costs are far lower than that of battery storage currently (Rs 6-8 crore per MW compared Rs 10-12 crore per MW). However, storage solutions can vary according to demand. Battery storage can prove to be a viable option going forward as and when capital costs reflect falling prices. The production linked incentive (PLI) scheme and viability gap funding (VGF) being provided for battery energy storage systems need to be seen in that light.

The other option of addressing the excess generation beyond demand fulfilments would be to sell it to commercial and industrial consumers or to power exchanges. C&I consumers especially those who would like to fulfil their green commitments have turned out to be a viable segment for RE generators. However, the country needs more vibrant and deep power exchange markets. Though India's power exchanges have certainly picked up over the last decade in terms of the percentage of energy being traded, they are still a far cry from developed economies.

As more complex dispatchable RE becomes the order of the day, the need to trade excess generation will grow. In some of these bids, merchant sales will need to be upwards of at-least a quarter of overall generation if levelised cost has to meet the discom's current average power procurement costs. Higher merchant sales can impact the project's bankability and it is here that structures to ensure a guaranteed floor price and a certain volume can prove to be viable options. A central nodal agency backed by suitable backstops can provide this guaranteed floor to generators and also partake of the excess energy.

Excess power that can be sold on the exchange with a guaranteed floor realisation will improve bankability and may result in more competitive prices for the discoms. The excess capacity shall depend on the guaranteed floor rate for the extra power sold on the exchange, provided the exchange has an offtake at the time of generation.

Building capabilities for RTC green energy could also help meet the country's ambitious green hydrogen targets. Power cost is likely to be a key driver to make green hydrogen projects viable. Without the development of compelling storage solutions and a deeper exchange market, we will neither meet our ambitious RE capacity targets nor attain the five million tonne green hydrogen capacity.

Singh is Group Head and Sural is Senior Executive Vice President at HDFC Bank

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CENTRE-STATE RIFT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Grand bargain 2.0' (IE, February 9). New Delhi witnessed a different kind of protest over the past two days. It was directed against the Union government and was staged by the state governments with their chief ministers, cabinets and legislators as participants. At a time when there is a need for greater freedom and flexibility for the states in matters of financial management, there has been a growing tendency to centralise powers, be it in the implementation of the GST regime or devolution of taxes to the states. As a result of such a skewed model, the consistently high-performing states suffer gross injustice. The 16th Finance Commission must objectively determine the tax devolution criteria with the objective of reducing inter-state disparities.

Khokan Das, *Kolkata*

DUE PROCESS IN PAK

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'At stake in Pakistan' (IE, February 9). Election results in Pakistan indicate that a clear majority government may not emerge and the nation may continue to be politically unstable. Imran Khan's PTI-backed candidates have levelled complaints of malpractices, manipulation and rigging to change the outcome. The formidable challenges of internal unrest, inflation, weak economy and problems with neighbours are not likely to be resolved in this confusion. Such fluid conditions prevailed in 1970 when the then popular and majority party was not allowed to form the government. It will be in the nation's interest of Pakistan if due process is followed this time in picking the next government.

Subhash Vaid, *New Delhi*

A CRIMINAL ACT

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Colonial habits die hard' (IE, February 9). The temple consecration is over and the nation must move on. But for argument's sake, it is inherently flawed to justify a majoritarian and overtly religious action by a modern, secular nation-state in 2024 by citing something carried out five centuries earlier in times that were very far removed from today. And while demonising Nehru is on expected lines, it is a novelty to see Gandhiji being selectively quoted to justify the mosque demolition, which was held a criminal act by the Supreme Court in their 2019 judgment.

Rahul Gaur, *Gurgaon*

Prudence prevails

Policymakers must continue to keep the focus on slowing price gains

The RBI's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) has prudently opted to persist with its objective of 'ensuring that inflation progressively aligns to the target' by keeping benchmark interest rates unchanged, and sticking with its stance of 'withdrawal of accommodation'. With a 5-1 majority, it has committed to keeping monetary policy unambiguously disinflationary so as to anchor inflation expectations, especially at a time when 'large and repetitive price shocks are interrupting the pace of disinflation'. On the rationale to leave the repo rate unchanged at 6.5% for a sixth straight meeting, Governor Shaktikanta Das observed that while domestic economic momentum remained strong, uncertainties in food prices continued to impinge on the headline inflation trajectory. The tangible risk that food price pressures could become more generalised and impact broader headline inflation was the main consideration, he explained. That the majority of the MPC was aligned in prioritising the battle against inflation needs to be seen in the backdrop of the recent trends in retail inflation. Headline retail inflation, which had eased from July's 15-month peak of 7.4% to 4.87% in October, however, rebounded to a four-month high of 5.69% in December, with food price gains gauged by the Consumer Food Price Index racing ahead to 9.53%, a sizeable 292 basis points faster than October's 6.61%.

That the uncertainty surrounding food price gains has begun to vex policymakers is reflected in a recent RBI Bulletin article that pointedly sought to find an answer to the question, 'Are Food Prices the 'True' Core of India's Inflation?'. Concluding that there is enough empirical evidence to support an assertion that 'there are times when food inflation mimics core inflation', the officials caution that given food's substantial share in the consumption basket, large and repeated food price shocks have the potential to ripple outward and undermine the goal of price stability by de-anchoring inflation expectations. The MPC's downward revision of its projection for average retail inflation in the January-March quarter to 5.0%, 20 basis points lower than its December forecast, reflects the small comfort policymakers have taken from the improvement in *rabi* sowing as well as a seasonal correction in vegetable prices. Still, the Department of Consumer Affairs' daily price monitoring dashboard shows the average retail price of more than two-thirds of the key food items it tracks remained higher on a year-on-year basis as on February 8. Policymakers need to stay steadfast in their resolve to durably slow price gains towards the 4% target or risk dampening consumption and thereby undermining the growth momentum.

A failed coup

Lula should not allow the case against Bolsonaro to fracture Brazil's polity

Brazilian police's startling allegations that former President Jair Bolsonaro, his allies and some military officers had attempted to stage a coup, after the 2022 presidential election, expose both the structural fault lines and political challenges the young South American democracy faces. The police adds that they were involved in spreading propaganda on voter fraud, pushing for new elections, recruiting troops to organise a coup, bringing judges under surveillance and encouraging the mob to stage protests defying the results. Well before the elections, Mr. Bolsonaro had raised doubts about the election systems. He had refused to concede defeat to his leftist rival Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, while his far-right supporters continued their protests, which culminated in the January 2023 riots at Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court and Presidential office. A court has ordered Mr. Bolsonaro to surrender his passport, and three of his allies and the head of his party have been arrested. The far-right leader, under whose watch Brazil's economy tanked, social tensions rose, the health-care system crumbled under the weight of COVID-19, and institutions came under attack, says the allegations are politically motivated. But he does not have an easy way out of the mess.

Those who were in power being targeted by the system is nothing new in Brazil. Former leftist President Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 on charges of violating budget rules. Lula, the incumbent President, spent 580 days in jail between his terms, on a corruption conviction, which was later annulled by the Supreme Court. While Ms. Rousseff and Lula were accused of corruption and fell prey to the powerful lobbies in Brazil's Congress and judiciary, the charges against Mr. Bolsonaro, a defender of the brutal dictatorship of 1964-1985, are far more serious. Democracy remains fragile and for the military, memories of the dictatorship are still fresh. Any attempt by politicians or officers to defy the election process and undermine democracy should be dealt with utmost seriousness. But it should be done as per the law, avoiding political vendetta. Lula returned to power on promises that he would strengthen democracy and enable prosperity and growth. His hands are full. He should also make sure that there are impartial investigations and the truth about the riots and the alleged coup plot is uncovered. Earlier, the 'car wash' scandal had exposed deep-rooted corruption in the political system, which led to the weakening of Lula's Workers' Party and the rise of the far-right. He should not allow the coup scandal to further fracture the country's polity and erode the legitimacy of its democratic system.

Mandal, Mandir, and now Market

Vinay Sitapati

is a Professor of law and politics and the author of 'Jugalbandi: The BJP Before Modi' and 'Half Lion: How P.V. Narasimha Rao Transformed India'

The three forces that define today's India were unleashed in the 12 months between August 1990 and August 1991. Thirty-three years later, it is these forces that are finally being rewarded with India's highest civilian honour, the Bharat Ratna.

The first force, Mandal, was unleashed in August 1990, when the V.P. Singh-led government announced 'backward caste' quotas in central government jobs. While reservations for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes had been recognised in the Constitution itself, quotas for middle castes began in the southern States from the 1950s. Their adoption in the northern States was symbolised in the 1970s by Bihar Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur. And, in 1990, they became central government policy through the implementation of the Mandal Commission report.

The second force that defines today's India is the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya. The movement began in the early 1980s and was adopted by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a political issue only later. As I argue in my book, *Jugalbandi: The BJP Before Modi*, L.K. Advani's *rath yatra* on a converted Toyota, from Somnath to Ayodhya, that began in September 1990, was a signal to the movement faithful that the party was finally with them.

The third force unleashed on India was Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's liberalisation. Like with Mandal and Mandir, the Market's journey had begun earlier. Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had tried to free the economy from red tape but lacked the political skills to navigate reform. It was only in mid-1991 that P.V. Narasimha Rao, the most skilled of political operators, overcame his many political handicaps to finally open up the economy.

They define the leader too

These three forces of Mandal, Mandir, and Market continue to define India; indeed, they define Narendra Modi himself. The consecration of the Ram temple last month brought the decades-long movement to its culmination. Mr. Modi's BJP now brands itself as a backward caste party. As the scholar, Nalin Mehta, has shown in his book, the *New BJP*, the party's candidates and voters represent lower caste Hindus, not just upper castes. The third 'M', markets, is just as central to Mr. Modi's politics. He is spending unprecedented amounts on the capital expenditure required for business to grow, and he has improved India's 'ease of doing business'. The recent choice of Bharat Ratna recipients – conferred on Karpoori Thakur, L.K. Advani, and Narasimha Rao – is the ultimate sign that Mandal, Mandir, and Market continue to define India today. I will leave it to others to draw lessons from the two other recipients of the Bharat Ratna, i.e., former Prime Minister of India and farm leader Chaudhary Charan Singh and agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan. Let me, instead, focus on the politician I know best: P.V. Narasimha Rao.

> The conferment of the Bharat Ratna on P.V. Narasimha Rao has lessons for the India of today

A forgotten Prime Minister

When I decided to write his biography in 2014, Indians had forgotten their Prime Minister from 1991 to 1996. An Ivy-League educated scholar on South Asian politics asked me who Narasimha Rao was. On my drive from Hyderabad airport to the office of Narasimha Rao's son for our first interview, my cab driver had barely heard of him and could only say, "He's the man after whom a flyover is named". Rao had been disowned by his own party and forgotten by everyone else (Manmohan Singh being an honourable exception).

Yet, my research showed that Narasimha Rao needed to be resurrected. To help me were 45 cartons of his private papers and over a 100 interviews with those who knew him – from his cook to his physician to his finance minister. It turned out that Narasimha Rao was no bystander. He actively plotted, outmanoeuvring the parliamentary opposition, domestic capitalists, and especially his own Congress party, to open India's economy to the world.

Narasimha Rao's reforms were not confined to economics alone. The former External Affairs Minister reoriented India's foreign policy towards the United States after the fall of the Berlin Wall; he brought in welfare schemes to the national level (thus being the forerunner of today's *labharthi* politics). He also ended militancy in Punjab while managing it in Kashmir. Narasimha Rao had his failures. In the lead up to the demolition of Babri Masjid, the Prime Minister behaved like a politician rather than a statesman (though the allegation that he was part of the conspiracy is without basis). More damaging was his reaction to the anti-Sikh riots in 1984. As Union Home Minister, Narasimha Rao controlled the Delhi police and could have ended the violence. But, he chose to listen to the Prime Minister's Office and do nothing. In my biography of Rao, *Half Lion*, I called it his "vilest hour".

These errors apart, the sheer scale of the transformation Narasimha Rao brought about needs a larger audience. In particular, there are three lessons he holds for politicians today.

The first is that India grows best when politicians trust society rather than the state. In economics, this means being open to the global economy as well as the private sector. This was the common sense view across the world in 1991. Narasimha Rao's genius was to translate this into common practice. Today, this free-market consensus is under threat. The U.S. – once a bastion of free trade – is mouthing tariffs and protectionism. And, for all the talk of "minimum government, maximum governance", the central government seems to think that an economy grows best when the state's hand is clearly visible.

The second lesson is that liberalisation-led growth is a precondition for welfare schemes. For all her talk of 'garibi hatao', Prime Minister Indira Gandhi spent very little to remove poverty; her government simply did not have enough money. What Narasimha Rao's economic reforms did (albeit with a decade-long lag) was to cause a boom in tax revenue. This has enabled the government to spend amounts on the poor that was unthinkable earlier.

When asked about his economic ideology, Narasimha Rao replied, "My model is not Margaret Thatcher but Willy Brandt." He was referring to the social democratic Chancellor of West Germany who, like Narasimha Rao, understood that free market capitalism and state-driven redistribution are two sides of the same coin.

A faith in harmony

The third, perhaps most important, lesson is harnessing the harmony embedded in Indian civilisation. Narasimha Rao was a scholar of Sanskrit and a devout Hindu, as the many astrological charts in his private papers show. But growing up in the Nizam's Hyderabad state, he had Muslim friends. He was also well read in Koranic text and could speak Persian and Urdu with felicity. From this knowledge of both Hinduism and Islam, Narasimha Rao understood the challenges of co-existence, but was hopeful that it was possible.

Amidst Narasimha Rao's private papers, I found a copy of the essay, 'Clash of Civilizations' by the Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. Written in 1993, the essay paints civilisations at war with one another, in particular, Islam with the West. On the margins, in red ink and in flowing hand, Narasimha Rao had written for his own eyes only: "Why are there only Western examples being given where violence – on some pretext or the other – is the basic propensity". Narasimha Rao argued that "there had been no religious wars in India" and felt that for every example of riots between Hindus and Muslims, there were counterexamples of non-violent co-existence. The ultimate lesson from Narasimha Rao may not be markets, foreign policy, or welfare. It may well be his faith in our civilisational ability to manage religious differences.

The decline of America's leadership

Krishnan Srinivasan

is a former Foreign Secretary

The traditional strengths of America are its values platform, its military power, its pivotal position in the global financial system, and as a technology pioneer. The energetic pro-American lobby in India advocates ever-closer engagement with the United States, rejecting arguments about its diminishing influence.

This is contradicted by authoritative commentators such as Ian Bremmer ("The US is already the world's most divided and dysfunctional advanced industrial democracy"), Laura Kuenssberg ("Western leaders in 2024 [are] grappling with a world where other dominant countries are less attached to conventional international rules") and Andrew Whitehead ("America's democracy seems to have lost the ability to renew itself") with former U.S. President Donald Trump and current President Joe Biden in the race for a second presidential term.

These experts are supported by Jonathan Freedland ("Not for nothing is there serious concern in the US that January 2025 could open a new chapter of US authoritarianism, even an American dictatorship), Frank Gardner ("The past 12 months have seen a number of setbacks for the US, Europe and other major democracies on the international politics stage...they point to a shifting balance of power away from the US-dominated, Western values that have held sway for years. On many fronts, the wind is blowing in the wrong direction for Western interests") and Niall Ferguson ("The harsh reality is that the US is no longer very good at getting B to do something that B would not otherwise do") which is more than evident in Israel's Gaza war. Ferguson adds that in purchasing power parity, China, in 2023, had an economy that was a fifth larger than that of the U.S. To him American problems were illegal immigration and deficits in the rule of law, secondary education, public health, new technologies, and the national debt rising to $32 trillion.

> Washington is failing to use its leverage in the international environment

After the Second World War, the U.S. shaped the rules-based international system. A rules-based order is an abstract concept; in practice it was neither centred on rules nor was it entirely global. It was a power-based system established by the U.S. and its allies, and Washington considered itself exempt from its norms, particularly those prohibiting interference in the internal affairs of other countries. The American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dissipated America's credibility due to its emphasis on military expeditionism, evidenced by about 750 military bases in 80 countries, though Al Jazeera says the number "may be even higher as not all data is published by the Pentagon".

Polarisation, issue of legitimacy

Actions speak louder than values, and Washington is failing to leverage its standing in the international environment, thereby empowering polarisation politically, economically and culturally. The U.S. withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership that emphasised human rights, transparency and liberal democracy, and also from many other international obligations. While it sought international dominance, domestic polarisation induced ideological separation, rendering cooperation in its two-party system non-existent.

In the West and parts of Asia, open liberalism and globalisation made links of community, family and society brittle, with many feeling excluded from economic progress. Individual freedom was juxtaposed against state, society and law, and the movements of people have resulted in a backlash against immigration, feeding populist movements.

The exercise of power is insufficient to be a dominant geopolitical player; legitimacy is also necessary. The most powerful leaders still crave legitimacy both at home and abroad.

There is now a shift in power equations, with challenges to the legitimacy of institutions and leaderships. Mr. Trump and his supporters openly question the validity of the U.S.'s electoral system. American soft power, such as its entertainment industry, which is non-government and unregulated, balances some negativity, as do enduring alliances in Southeast Asia and Europe, though U.S. complicity with Israel's violence against Palestinians has scrambled all its pre-existing policies in West Asia.

Moves by China and Russia

The leaders of China and Russia are determined to maintain their authoritarian regimes and seek to reshape the international system, using trade, pressure and diasporic ties to obstruct the spread of western democratic values that have held sway for decades. In parts of Asia and Africa, western liberalism is often interpreted at worst as a smoke screen for neo-imperialism, and at best as an insensitive expression of American and European arrogance. And although there is no chance of dethroning the international financial settlement infrastructure soon, BRICS' policies seem to herald a contest between local currencies and the dollar because the risks in the current dollar-centric system are unacceptably high.

U.S.-China security and economic competition is the central issue in the world today, and will be potentially dangerous in the years to come. China campaigns to project power with traditional and non-traditional techniques, such as the Confucius Institutes, TikTok and gaming. Its prowess in high technology and geo-engineering inspire admiration, along with its programme of overseas infrastructure financing unmatched by any other country. Due to internal dissonance, the U.S. has failed to assume leadership in Artificial Intelligence when compared to China and the European Union, which are setting the standards.

Whether or not the U.S. remains "the indispensable nation", as former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright termed it, India should develop an advantageous relationship with America while keeping in mind its deficiencies.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A self pat

There is no doubt that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's achievements during the 10-year rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party government such as the dilution of Article 370 and the consecration of the Ram Temple are commendable but his government is trying to create an impression that only the present BJP leadership is the saviour of the country and that earlier governments did nothing. How can one undermine the Congress's contribution, from its key role in securing Independence, the nationalisation of banks, industrialisation, the ushering in of science and technology, reforms in the financial sector and so on? Nation building is not confined to one individual or party.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,
Hyderabad

Opposition's lack of punch

It is surprising that the Opposition, especially the Congress, has been so weak in countering the BJP's "white paper". Had Members of the Opposition done their homework, they could have had the government pinned to the ropes on just the issue of demonetisation. After watching the proceedings in Parliament yesterday, the Opposition has been a huge disappointment and it was the BJP that stole the show.

R. Vaidyanathan,
Bengaluru

The shadow of politics

The unprecedented long list of people being conferred the Bharat Ratna this year seems to be reflective of the shrewd political strategy of the BJP which is aimed at 'enticing' a wide range of voters of myriad social, political and cultural leanings. The powerful political narrative being built around Ayodhya, a UCC and the 'North-South divide' is believed by many political scientists to be a game-changer. It remains to be seen whether this political plan will impact the INDIA bloc.

N. Raveendra Babu,
Hyderabad

The highlighting of yoga

Australian Open men's champion and recipient of the *Sportstar* Ace of Aces honour 2024 Rohan Bopanna mentioning how Iyengar Yoga helped him is a point that sportspersons and sport authorities must note. While regular fitness and a wellness regime prescribed by sports physios have a place, the need to have a closer look at yoga is the key message.

B. Sundar Raman,
Coimbatore