

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13, 2024



UTILISING SOFT POWER

Union minister for youth affairs and sports Anurag Thakur

“If we have to become a global superpower, we have to showcase and capitalise the soft power of sports. Music, films and sports are vehicles to ride and we are good at all of them”

Free-for-all must end

The guilty must be punished, but Sebi should take care not to stifle SME fund-raising via IPOs

A DAY AFTER Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch expressed concerns over “signs of manipulation” in the small and medium scale enterprises (SME) segment, the SME initial public offer (IPO) index fell 4.67%—a clear signal of the nervousness among investors betting on these stocks. In the past one year, the SME IPO segment has been booming with many small offers seeing subscriptions of even 500x and 1,000x, indicating that many short-term investors have been looking to make hay while the sun shines. Since the launch of the platform in FY13, a total of ₹10,500 crore was raised till FY23. In FY24 itself, 183 companies have raised ₹5,565 crore—over 50% more than the entire money raised in over a decade.

From the perspective of the stock market investors, the growth in the SME segment should be good news. The deepening of the market implies that more players are participating. At the same time, it’s a fact that the chances of getting multi-baggers improve exponentially. There is a high element of risk as well. There are good chances that the stock prices are in their teens, making them easy to manipulate—something that the market regulator has been worried for quite some time. These stocks usually trade or even during the IPO, in lots of a minimum of ₹1-1.5 lakh. Consequently, there is some entry barrier.

To temper the enthusiasm further, last October, Sebi asked the BSE and NSE to put these stocks under additional and graded surveillance measures. However, that did little to curb the exuberance Sebi has no doubt attempted to provide a listing environment for SMEs that is more facilitative, and thus less regulated than listing for the mainboard. This is because SMEs may find it hard to comply with many of those requirements that are there for the mainboard companies. However, the feedback has been that some entities are misusing this facilitative framework.

Under such circumstances, there is no doubt that Sebi has to take pre-emptive action, which is not a surprise as many market participants have been expecting the ‘free-for-all’ party to end for quite some time now. Buch said as much when she said, “We are able to see certain patterns. However, as per our regulation, the way that we need to construct the entire case, we do need to take some time to do that in a robust manner.” But there is an important catch here. Punishing one or two big players for manipulating stock prices can set examples that no one is above the law—both the US Federal Reserve and Securities Exchange Commission do it regularly by fining some of the big names in the financial sector. But bringing blanket laws or punishing the entire industry will have the undesirable effect of freezing the entire segment. After all, the existence of an SME exchange platform is extremely important since there are many small businesses which require funds for growth. And both the corporate bond market and bank loans will be too expensive for them. Globally, there are many exchanges which support small companies in their respective countries. Instead of shooting an arrow to kill a mosquito, Sebi should go for punishment of only a select few.

Solar success is a curse for China's manufacturers

EVER SINCE PHOTOVOLTAIC cells started popping up on pocket calculators and building roofs a few decades ago, solar power has faced a key drawback: It’s a nice technology, but there’s simply not enough of it to make a difference. Right now, it’s facing the opposite difficulty. The tidal wave of investment panels has swelled to the point that it is threatening to overwhelm the global industry. Amid the onslaught of cheap Chinese-made modules, manufacturers have either walled themselves off behind tariff barriers (as in India and the US) or resigned themselves to extinction, as in Europe. Now, even the Chinese companies blamed for the current glut are panicking.

Beijing should introduce bidding rules to prevent low-quality, below-cost products being put onto the market, Zhong Baoshen, chairman of the biggest panel maker, Longi Green Energy Technology Co., said last week. The slump in prices is so drastic that there is now “no profit across the entire supply chain,” Gao Jifan, Zhong’s counterpart at third-placed Trina Solar Co., told a BloombergNEF summit last November.

On the face of it, this sounds like a great problem to have. From the perspective of manufacturing, the solar bit of the path to net zero is already pretty much solved. The world will need to be installing about 650 gigawatts of solar a year in 2030 to avoid catastrophic climate change, according to the International Energy Agency. But major manufacturers have already built about 783GW of annual production capacity and we might hit the IEA’s 2030 installation target this year, according to BloombergNEF. The hitch in all this is that it’s a lot harder to connect a solar panel than it is to make one. Utilities and even households face regulatory, political and logistical roadblocks joining the grid. Module costs have already fallen by more than half over the past two years. The current excess suggests further price declines are to come, which is great news for consumers, but terrible for manufacturers.

You might think that’s a sign that the entire industry is headed for a crash, but previous high-tech revolutions offer reasons for optimism. Solar panels are ultimately

DAVID FICKLING TIM CULPAN

Bloomberg

tempting manufacturers to stake out territory with little regard for profit. Without action, competition becomes so fierce that value ends up getting destroyed.

One way out of this is price fixing. That happened with DRAM, a type of high-speed computer memory chip, during the 2000s. The result was a slew of lawsuits and a market that’s now become an oligopoly ruled by Samsung Electronics Co., SK Hynix Inc. and Micron Technology Inc. Samsung, LG Display Co., and a group of Taiwanese companies were fined €648 million (\$859 million) by the European Union in 2010 for operating a price cartel in LCD television and monitor screens.

On the face of it, government-mandated price controls were the perfect way out of this dilemma. The onslaught of Chinese-made clean technology—from solar panels to electric vehicles to lithium-ion batteries and even wind turbine components—has been raising hackles among the country’s trade partners, who fear a green supply chain dominated by a geopolitical rival. If Beijing was to step in, that might help Chinese manufacturers restore profitability while easing the headlong deflation that’s provoking such fear and loathing in Brussels, Washington and New Delhi.

That’s the wrong approach, however. For all that trading partners like to howl about subsidies, China’s white-knuckle solar industry doesn’t look like the product of a state-directed industrial policy, but of a (terrifyingly) free market in the grip of a gold rush. Other capital-intensive, commodified industries like computer chips, mining, petroleum and aviation periodically go through the same sorts of cycles. The outcome of all that competitive bloodletting is typically a more concentrated market where smaller players go out of business, while the most efficient manufacturers take market share until the next disruptive innovation comes along.

That’s reason for Beijing to spurn industry calls for it to fix the current crisis. What China’s solar sector—and a world badly in need of abundant, cheap renewable power—needs right now is not state intervention to support panel prices, but a free hand to let them fall further, and further.

TECHPROOF EXPRESS

THERE MUST BE A CONSENSUS ON AI AUDITS TO ENSURE THAT GOOGLE’S GEMINI FIASCO ISN’T REPEATED

Algorithms and the black-box

THE WORD “ALGORITHM” made its way out of the lexicons of mathematicians and computer scientists and moved into popular use a few years ago. I see the word being freely used today by the laity, but sometimes wonder whether those using the word have a sufficient understanding of what it means.

At its heart, the algorithm is simple. It is a rule used to automate how a piece of data is handled. In other words, it forms the base for the classical logic used in computing of the if/then/else type of question. So, if “z” happens, do “x”. Else, do “y”. At the base level, a computer program is just an agglomeration of several such algorithms, strung through in a logical sequence, that allows for a certain result with the data that has been so manipulated. These are simple operations on data sets. Computers seem as if they are all powerful not because they are intelligent, but simply because they can perform such automated algorithmic functions at much greater speed than the human mind.

Over the last few years however, the word “algorithm” has taken on new meaning. We speak of employees in gig-work companies such as Uber and Zomato as being “managed by an algorithm”. Google’s algorithms allow for targeted advertising. Facebook’s content is served up based on algorithms which attempt to predict what the viewer would like to see. Medico-radiological images are examined, and diagnoses made based on these algorithms. Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)’s prediction methodologies are based on such algorithms. Entire sets of start-ups are funded based solely on their being able to “beat” the algorithm” of large engines such as YouTube or Instagram.

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant and venture capitalist
By invitation

As the word has passed into the lexicon of commoners, the understanding of its simple meaning has changed. We think that the firms that create such algorithms also have the ability to change such algorithms. Witness the criticism of Google Gemini’s image generating capabilities last month, which led its co-founder Sergei Brin to confess that the firm had “definitely messed up”. But the genie was out of the bottle. Gemini showed Pops and American “Founding Fathers” who were black, and Chinese women and other people of colour in World War II German Wehrmacht uniforms. Other parts of Gemini, which were handling text responses, made the claim that they couldn’t differentiate between the harm caused by Elon Musk’s memes and Adolf Hitler. So much for useful generative AI.

When we criticise the results of such new age algorithms, we assume that if a Google or a Facebook created such an algorithm, then it stands to reason that they can fix them. This is true in so far as overall responsibility for the results of algorithms are concerned, but we miss an important point. What we don’t understand in the world of AI is that while a firm may set off an initial algorithm, the algo-

rithm then learns and changes itself.

While their owners may periodically interfere with their functioning, as Google plainly did with Gemini so that it could appear “politically correct”, they cannot completely control an algorithm that is off and functioning calling on various databases, operating systems and so on to “better” itself. The functioning of these AI algorithms becomes a “black-box”.

Little wonder then, that academics and practitioners alike are working hard on methods to audit and thereby potentially modify these black-boxes. But as I have pointed out above and Google has demonstrated, such interval-based audits of these black-boxes may not be sufficient to rein in their

ability to go off by themselves and produce unacceptable results.

In a recent exploration of the effectiveness of AI audits, a team led by Stephen Casper and others from prestigious institutions like MIT, Harvard, and others, highlighted the limitations of black-box audits and advocated for more comprehensive access models to ensure rigorous evaluation of AI systems (bit.ly/3wScqTT). Black-box audits, where auditors can only interact with the system through its inputs and out-

Black-box audits, where auditors can only interact with the system through its inputs and outputs, severely limit the ability to uncover deep-seated issues

Not India’s fight



ANITA INDER SINGH

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POLITICAL PARLEYS BETWEEN India and Western countries are usually sugared with talk about the invaluable ties between democracies. Despite India’s neutrality on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its huge oil buys from Russia over the last two years, its relations with the US and European Union remain friendly. But, complications arising from Western sanctions on Russia and the China-Russia cooperation on hi-tech could affect India and its ties with the West.

Recently, the EU announced that it would sanction companies or people in 27 countries including India, Russia, Iran, China, and Syria that have some connection to Russia’s defence and security sector. They are helping Russia to get around Western sanctions with dual use items that can be used for both civilian and military applications such as technology, satellites or drones.

The contrasting responses of the West and India to Russia’s aggression in Ukraine show some strains. The US and EU hold that Russia poses an immediate threat to Europe and the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order.

Like China, India has abstained from condemning Russia’s invasion. Whether out of indifference or annoyance, so far, no Western country has responded to Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar’s recent statement that Russia has never hurt India’s interests. Delhi may be thinking that isolating Russia will drive Moscow into Beijing’s embrace and weaken Russia’s willingness to support India’s interests when they conflict

with those of China. But Russia has never supported India without taking into consideration its own relationship with China. For instance, Moscow was neutral when Chinese and Indian troops clashed on their shared border in 2020. Moreover, Moscow sided with Beijing in the 1962 India-China war and provided Beijing with diplomatic and intelligence support. It also delayed delivery of MIG fighter jets to India. Russia’s 1971 treaty of friendship with India was facilitated by the fact that Chinese and Soviet troops engaged in skirmishes on the Sino-Russian border in 1969. Currently,

strong economic and military ties define the “no-limits” Russia-China partnership. Having mounted its destructive invasion of Ukraine, Russia has failed to deliver its promised military equipment to India, and Delhi is exploring western options.

The US and India have been strengthening their defence relationship over the last decade but Washington will not share critical technology with a non-ally. Washington is also concerned that Russian military platforms—the result of India’s long dependence on Russia—are technologically incompatible with those of the US. Moreover, India cannot do much to help the US to deter China’s expansionism in the Indo-Pacific, because its top security priority is its immediate Indian Ocean neighbourhood. And India’s defence

spending is less than one-third of China.

With Russian President Vladimir Putin warning of nuclear strikes, Russia’s war in Ukraine threatens Europe. The West is concerned that Russian missile strikes on Ukraine have been made possible with Chinese help. China is providing Russia—if not with weapons—then with components which enable Russia to manufacture them. The West believes that Moscow is circumventing sanctions to obtain the components necessary for the manufacture of state-of-the-art weapons and that China is giving Russia dual use materials and components for military production.

Times have changed. Until Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, China was Russia’s second-largest arms buyer. India remains Moscow’s largest military customer. “Ukraine 2022” has made Russia militarily dependent on China, which has been silent about its military aid to Moscow. Despite backing Moscow politically and diplomatically, Beijing has declared that it will not send weapons to Russia or Ukraine. But in January 2024, the Russian defence ministry stated that Chinese defence minister Dong Jun confirmed China’s support to Russia during a bilateral video meeting.

The West is keeping watch on Russia’s military dependence on China for technologies and components. India should

Like Russia, India favours a multipolar global order—which means that it doesn’t want to be pushed around by the US world sheriff, but India is not anti-West

follow suit—partly because of its longstanding border dispute with China, partly because it cannot afford to alienate the US strategically and economically. And its strong economic ties with the EU and the US are essential for its progress.

While India is trying to strengthen ties with the West, its import of Russian oil and defence ties with Russia could rule out closer defence cooperation with the US. So far, the West has been largely understanding about India’s strategic problems with China. But Moscow’s warmongering and threats to launch nuclear strikes as it gets some military help from China will stiffen the West’s resolve against Russia and could strain ties between India and the West, especially if Delhi praises Russia as the do-gooder to India.

Like Russia, India favours a multipolar global order—which means that it doesn’t want to be pushed around by the US world sheriff. But unlike China and Russia, India is not anti-West, if only because its second and third largest military suppliers are the US and France. The US and France can offer India some arms and many projects for economic development. By contrast, a warring Russia, whose main strategic aim is to extinguish Ukraine’s statehood, no matter how long it takes, will not be able to offer either for a considerable time to come.

The choice before India is clear. It should avoid getting stuck in the West-Russia-China strategic cat’s cradle. Instead, it should strengthen constructive and beneficial strategic and economic relationships with the West.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Political gimmick

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has been perceived as a political gimmick strategically timed before the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Critics question the timing, suggesting that if the Union government was genuinely committed to the CAA, it could have been notified earlier. Moreover, there is scepticism about the CAA being used as a tool to deceive the public.

The assertion is clear: discrimination based on religion or caste is unacceptable, and the CAA’s potential for such discrimination is troubling. People wonder whether the CAA portal will genuinely accommodate individuals from all religions. Additionally, there is irony in the ruling party questioning the citizenship of individuals who supported them in elections. This contradiction highlights the political dynamics at play and underscores the need for

transparent citizenship policies.

—Vijaykumar HK, Raichur

PSBs and recovery

Apropos of ‘Have NPAs really declined?’, the current rally of the PSBs in the stock markets is no indication that they are doing well. The books have been cleaned up by writing offs of long standing NPAs. As a result, the banks balance sheet looks healthier. Whether things have really improved only time will tell. The biggest

problem with PSB’s is that the officials are not rewarded for the right decisions but are made to suffer because of the wrong ones. Though this government has been trying to expedite the recoveries, there is much to be done in this regard as there are too many legal hurdles in recovering the losses incurred by banks in their bid to recover loans.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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OUR VIEW



Bitcoin's bounce holds a lesson for central banks

As its fresh peak defies crypto doomsayers, Bitcoin's value as an artefact of the digital age lies in the mirror it has held up to the way monetary policy is usually conducted everywhere

The world's original cryptocurrency, Bitcoin, scaled a fresh peak on Monday. It touched \$72,234 per token, whipping past its pandemic summit of almost \$69,000 back in November 2021. It lost about three-fourths of its value in a prolonged slump after that, with cryptosceptics gloating over the deflation of an 'asset' with neither any intrinsic value nor yield. Today, with the tables turned, what was dismissed as a covid blip is back in the spotlight. The latest upshoot was mostly on the back of US flows into recently launched exchange-traded crypto funds, but it's the underlying scarcity of Bitcoin that explains its basic appeal as an investor pick. This April, the supply of new tokens will halve, as it's designed to do every four years. While new Bitcoin can be 'mined' online by expending energy and exercising minds to validate open-ledger transfers on its 'blockchain,' Satoshi Nakamoto—as Bitcoin's mystery originator likes to be called—had capped the total at 21 million coins in all. Since the periodic halving of new tokens will ensure all Bitcoin ever created will converge to that figure, it is destined to stay scarce. Hence, so long as demand exists, it can act like a form of digital gold: No matter how hard alchemists try, they can't add to its overall stock. Which, of course, was the big idea.

That's also what makes Bitcoin such an enigmatic artefact of the digital age. It began life as a medium of exchange, after all, a currency run by software beyond the reach of human control, aiming to challenge the fiat money issued by central banks. At its core lies a tribute to the monetarist theory of Milton Friedman, an economist who warned against the over-supply of currency. Issuers, he held, were

given to printing an excess of it in the hope that such an easy-money policy would act as a stimulant for the economy. Although commerce can briefly be sped up this way, Friedman argued, it would eventually prove inflationary as economic agents will respond by pricing everything up, including wages. Inflated price expectations, thus, would take us back to square one. This didn't mean that cash levels had to be held constant; just that any increase had to be kept in line with the economy's capacity to generate real value. Else, too much money would go chasing too few goods and services. It's another matter that central banks routinely use their interest rates—which serve to tighten or loosen lending—as policy tools for economic modulation. While this is a valid aim (within limits), critics believe it has been corrupted by a tendency to err in favour of growth over inflation, as seen in the gush of cheap credit let loose after almost every crisis. Currencies often get debased in the process. A way to end the follies of this temptation, argue crypto fans, is to have a kind of artificial intelligence do the job. Bitcoin, by design, cannot be oversupplied. In that sense, it holds up a mirror to the world's monetary methods.

This argument must not be taken too far, though. Bitcoin supply is inflexible and thus not responsive to the needs of any economy. Moreover, in its potential use as a currency, the concept violates a key state monopoly, which explains the Reserve Bank of India's discomfort with it. After the judiciary lifted RBI's crypto curbs about half a decade ago, the government began to treat it like just another taxation target. The real significance of Bitcoin, though, lies in the popularity of its insurgency and the notice it has served central bankers everywhere.



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Last week, I came across a newspaper article about the perils of a new form of entertainment. This scourge was, the piece argued, "a vehicle of pure moral and religious instruction" that exerted, on all who used it, a "deteriorating moral influence." It had "become one of the most momentous influences acting on the popular mind" to the point where it would be sheer "rashness to disregard" the "presumptive evidence of danger" that it posed.

Other newspapers told of the deleterious effects it could have on health—concerns that it could cause the eyes to "have a sort of weary, heavy feeling" which may leave them "bloodshot and painful." There were also concerns about the effect it could have on our mental health, the fear that it would lead to a sharp decline in productivity, addiction and even suicide.

If, having read so far, you are convinced that these articles refer to a brand new tech device—the latest virtual reality headset or some form of direct neural interface—you

are forgiven. After all, these are exactly the sort of concerns one would expect these kinds of technology to evoke. As a matter of fact, the articles in question were from the newspaper archives of the early 1800s and the fears they were expressing were in relation to the rapid proliferation of paper-printed novels of fiction.

Change is always met with resistance. We worry about the harm it can cause to our existing way of life and the discomfort we will have to suffer. But in time, we almost always come to realize that our fears were mistaken. That the harms we thought would destroy us are not nearly as serious as we thought they would be.

With the rise in the popularity of bicycles, newspapers filled up with stories about the toll cycling would take on our physical health; how it would lead to heart trouble and nervous exhaustion, and give rise to a whole host of new ailments like "bicycle face" (an expression of exhaustion that would be caused by the sheer effort of cycling) and "bicycle nose" (the physical thickening of our olfactory organs due to irritation of the nasal membrane in response to the inhalation of dust on country roads). These were physical changes that many in the medical community feared would be

etched permanently on the faces of riders.

When cities began to electrify, citizens started worrying about the new dangers this latest technology would pose. First and foremost was the risk of electrocution, a fear that was somewhat justified by the large number of gruesome fatalities that occurred on a nearly daily basis in those early days of learning to live with electricity. But there were also other somewhat more tangential concerns. For instance, there was a fear that prolonged exposure to electric light would lead to eye strain and insomnia, and that this sort of artificial illumination would harm the "human spirit." We worried that the convenience offered by electric appliances would give rise to a new form of moral decay as a result of which those who used the technology would end up losing their connection with the more natural, labour-intensive way of life.

Yet, despite our fears, technology has almost always proven net positive for society. Electricity became a powerful general

purpose technology that radically transformed every aspect of the way we live and work to the point where it is today an integral part of daily life. The bicycle revolutionized personal transport, and, instead of "morally corrupting" women as feared, in fact played a crucial role in their emancipation.

Needless to say, our worries about physical distress and facial disfigurement were unfounded and today cycling is an athletic activity widely enjoyed by millions.

Despite the vocal opposition it had to weather in its early days, fiction is not only universally regarded as good for the mind, body and soul, our abiding worry today is that our children are not reading as much as they should be—a fear that future generations will, no doubt, find laughable.

Today, we find ourselves in a somewhat similar dynamic in the context of artificial intelligence (AI). Many of the fears that are being expressed in the popular press are reminiscent of the apprehensions that had

been voiced in the past over various other technologies. As before, there is a worry that AI will displace jobs and cause widespread moral degradation in society. And, just like in the past, we have conjured a number of new harms to keep ourselves anxious—the loss of our personal privacy, the proliferation of fake news and the impact that all of this will have on our democratic institutions and political processes.

I dare say history will once again prove us wrong. The jobs that AI displaces will, more likely than not, make way for new ones—which call for different skills and answer to new job descriptions. While the dangers are real, I have no doubt that we will learn to live with them in much the same way that we live with electricity—safe in our homes and offices despite the fact that less than an inch of plaster separates us from live wires carrying enough current to fry us in an instant. I have no doubt that we will create similar guardrails to protect us from the harmful effects of AI, standard operating procedures that will become industry-wide norms, and allow us to live with AI in much the same way as we do with electricity.

We have always swung from technophobia to acceptance. I have no doubt that we will again.

GUEST VIEW

Much more private credit would be required for fast GDP growth

We must develop these sources because banks alone can't fulfil India's fast-growing credit appetite



SANTANU SENGUPTA
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formal bank credit, NBFCs proved to be a critical source of loans, growing eight times and now representing 16% of TPSC.

With the growth and wider reach of mutual funds and insurance companies, household and corporate savings have been channelled into corporate bonds and commercial paper markets in India. The commercial paper market supports the short-term financing requirements of private companies. The share of the bond market net of lending to NBFCs has remained stable at around 14% over the past 13 years.

ECBs or foreign currency loans of Indian corporates have also increased during the last decade. This was probably driven by a period of cheap dollar funding, as the Fed funds rate in the US hit its zero lower bound, but ECBs have remained almost constant as a share of TPSC at around 10%.

We estimate India's nominal GDP will grow to around ₹565 trillion (around \$7 trillion) by 2030, which implies an incremental TPSC demand of around ₹210 trillion (\$2.5 trillion). This is unlikely to be funded by commercial banks alone. Domestic as well as foreign bond markets and NBFCs will have to meet much of the additional financing requirement by corporates and households, respectively.

Going by the current shares of TPSC sub-components, we estimate that the contribution of banks (excluding NBFCs) will be around ₹125 trillion (\$1.5 trillion), while domestic bond markets and NBFCs will contribute around ₹30-35 trillion (\$400 billion) each, and foreign currency loans (ECBs), around ₹20 trillion (\$250 billion). These are daunting numbers, and if trends over the last decade are indicative, then non-bank financing sources must fund a bigger chunk of this burgeoning credit demand than many would have anticipated.

So, what could help non-bank financing sources prepare to meet the incremental credit demand needed to

power India's economic growth over the rest of the decade?

Increasing the liquidity and depth of corporate bond markets—both primary and secondary—can make the financial system less commercial bank-centric. This will also likely require more regulatory coordination between the Securities and Exchange Board of India, which oversees bond markets, and the Reserve Bank of India, which has historically been responsible for credit oversight and regulates as well as supervises commercial banks (in addition to ECBs).

Over time, the bond market needs to be made accessible for all borrowers—large, medium and small. Currently, lower-rated borrowers can hardly access bond markets, and credit via this avenue is mostly available to well-rated large borrowers, some of which are quasi-sovereign. We need to develop a deep credit market in India and help distribute risk better for the overall credit ecosystem to perform well.

There has been an increase in assets under the management of long-duration investment entities, like insurance and pension funds, thanks mainly to the increased financialization of household savings. This has been supplemented by larger issuances of longer-dated bonds by central and state governments, which have been bought by these investors, resulting in a flat government bond yield curve in India. However, the corporate bond market has a low share of long-dated issuances, which are vital for funding infrastructure assets.

Much of the infrastructure creation in recent years has been led by significant capital expenditure on the central government's part. As the government aims to consolidate its fiscal position and vacates space in the bond market, it is important that the corporate bond market is incentivized to move towards long-dated issuances, so that long-term savings are channelled into infrastructure asset creation.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

The root problem with conventional currency is all the trust that's required to make it work. The central bank must be trusted not to debase the currency, but the history of fiat currency is full of breaches of that trust.

SATOSHI NAKAMOTO

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Fears of technological change are vastly exaggerated

RAHUL MATTHAN



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Last week, I came across a newspaper article about the perils of a new form of entertainment. This scourge was, the piece argued, "a vehicle of pure moral and religious instruction" that exerted, on all who used it, a "deteriorating moral influence." It had "become one of the most momentous influences acting on the popular mind" to the point where it would be sheer "rashness to disregard" the "presumptive evidence of danger" that it posed.

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Despite the vocal opposition it had to weather in its early days, fiction is not only universally regarded as good for the mind, body and soul, our abiding worry today is that our children are not reading as much as they should be—a fear that future generations will, no doubt, find laughable.

Today, we find ourselves in a somewhat similar dynamic in the context of artificial intelligence (AI). Many of the fears that are being expressed in the popular press are reminiscent of the apprehensions that had

been voiced in the past over various other technologies. As before, there is a worry that AI will displace jobs and cause widespread moral degradation in society. And, just like in the past, we have conjured a number of new harms to keep ourselves anxious—the loss of our personal privacy, the proliferation of fake news and the impact that all of this will have on our democratic institutions and political processes.

I dare say history will once again prove us wrong. The jobs that AI displaces will, more likely than not, make way for new ones—which call for different skills and answer to new job descriptions. While the dangers are real, I have no doubt that we will learn to live with them in much the same way that we live with electricity—safe in our homes and offices despite the fact that less than an inch of plaster separates us from live wires carrying enough current to fry us in an instant. I have no doubt that we will create similar guardrails to protect us from the harmful effects of AI, standard operating procedures that will become industry-wide norms, and allow us to live with AI in much the same way as we do with electricity.

We have always swung from technophobia to acceptance. I have no doubt that we will again.



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Policy coordination could boost trans-Asia Pacific e-commerce

An APAC forum led by India could result in regional cooperation and policy harmonization to the benefit of sellers and buyers



ARPITA MUKHERJEE & TRISHALI KHANNA

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The Asia Pacific (APAC) region, with over 50 diverse countries, is currently experiencing phenomenal economic growth. Home to more than half the world's population (52% in 2023) and economic giants like Japan and India, the region's GDP (35.4% of the world's in 2023) has surpassed that of North America and Europe. This trajectory is projected to continue, with APAC projected to grow at 4.2% in 2024 by the International Monetary Fund, significantly faster than the global pace of 2.9%, with the economies of countries like India and Bangladesh expected to expand at double the world's rate.

With high economic growth, the APAC region has become the world's largest market for electronic commerce. According to a 2023 study by Data Bridge Market Research, the e-commerce sector of the region was valued at \$2.9 trillion in 2022 and is projected to reach nearly \$6.2 trillion by 2030. In 2022, the region accounted for around 58% of the global retail e-commerce market. India saw a surge in online consumers, with 101 million new shoppers using the internet between 2020 and 2022, while registered micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) tripled from 5.1 million in 2021 to 15 million in 2023. Indonesia witnessed a similar trend, with over 20.2 million MSMEs joining online platforms in 2022. This boom is driven by the internet's ability to expand market reach, reduce costs and provide new channels.

The APAC region is experiencing a confluence of factors that are creating a 'perfect storm' in favour of e-commerce growth. A burgeoning middle-class with rising disposable income, projected to reach a staggering 3.5 billion by 2030, forms a massive consumer base eager to shop online. MSMEs are joining the wave, with 72% of them in the region leveraging e-commerce platforms and vulnerable groups like women entrepreneurs adapting fast to e-com platforms thanks to the efforts of governments and organizations like UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). Fast internet penetration, having exceeded 58% in 2022 and expected to surpass 70% by 2030, coupled with a mobile-first population of over 4.8 billion users, creates a ready online audience. India exemplifies this trend, boasting the second-highest number of smartphone users globally (659 million in 2022), with a significant shift witnessed towards digital wallets based on platforms like the Unified Payments Interface. This growth in digital wallets is a regional phenomenon, with their share in e-com transactions doubling between 2018 and 2023. Advancements in technology, such as faster telecom networks and big data, are further fuelling the boom. Apart from speed, these advancements offer personalized



experiences and improved logistics to the benefit of businesses as well as consumers.

Despite the boom in APAC e-commerce, hurdles still exist for MSMEs and other vulnerable groups in the region as they look forward to global expansions and exports. High logistical costs, stiff customs rules and complex clearance procedures complicate cross-border trade. Cash on Delivery (CoD), though preferred by many in Southeast Asia, creates logistical challenges and limits access to credit. Further, cybersecurity threats, data privacy concerns and the presence of counterfeit products on some platforms can deter consumers and businesses. Unlocking APAC's full e-commerce potential requires infrastructure improvements, regulatory harmonization and robust cybersecurity measures to ensure a secure and trustworthy online environment.

E-commerce regulation across the region is a complex patchwork at the moment. While some countries (like Singapore with its 2014 E-Commerce Act) have established specific regulations, others rely on broader consumer protection laws. Data privacy and the government's ability to regulate technology are key concerns for many policymakers. Meanwhile, AI policies remain in their early stages, with China reportedly focusing on ethical development and responsible use.

At the same time, several countries in the region are implementing policies to aid MSMEs in using e-commerce to enhance their domestic and global reach. India's 2020 Digital Shakti programme exemplifies this, offering MSMEs subsidies and training on how to embrace online marketplaces.

Consumer protection typically falls under existing laws, focusing on areas like returns, warranties and dispute resolution. The commitment level of nations to cross-border digital trade varies, with Singapore actively pursuing e-com-friendly free trade agreements. In contrast, others have a more cautious and selective approach. Social media regulations are also evolving, with Vietnam imposing restrictions on harmful or offensive content.

While regulations evolve with technology, there is a need for discussions, sharing of best practices and partnerships to facilitate trade and exports, even as emerging policy concerns are addressed. An APAC policy forum, with India taking the lead, could help forge partnerships and lead to regional cooperation and policy harmonization that can benefit businesses (especially MSMEs and women entrepreneurs) and consumers by fostering a more predictable and secure environment for online trade.

The APAC region is a hotbed of e-commerce activity, supported by a growing middle class, widespread internet and mobile adoption and a digital payments revolution. This confluence of economic and technological forces propels the region to the forefront of online retail. However, to unlock its full potential, greater regulatory cooperation among APAC countries through a policy forum is the need of the hour. A collaborative approach would streamline operations for businesses and expand their market reach. Consumers would also benefit from a wider selection of products and a more secure e-shopping experience.

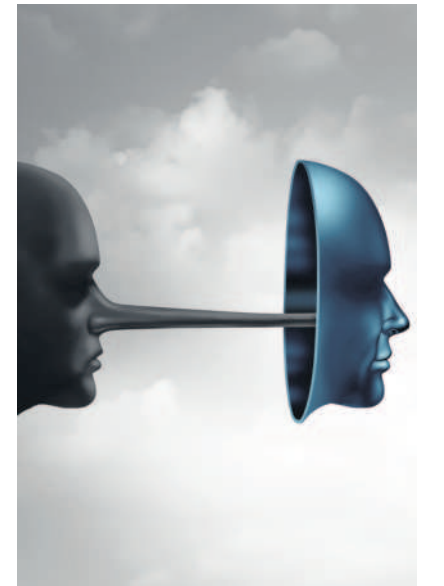
These are the authors' personal views.

Generative AI looks set to give advertising a credibility crisis

Deepfakes cloning real people are the latest in identity theft for ads



PARMY OLSON is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.



People may soon start rejecting all that they see as fake

Advertising has always walked a thin line between embellishment and fabrication. In the new age of generative artificial intelligence, the latter is becoming easier. Making an online ad no longer requires careful staging of well-lit photographs because now they can be made and enhanced in fantastical ways. Consumers need to sharpen their wits as we move from unnaturally juicy burgers to depictions of people and food that aren't physically plausible. An example is the bizarre pasta concoction that Instacart, a US-based grocery-delivery service, used in a recent marketing campaign.

Instacart has now deleted the Frankenstein's monster of food and recipes that don't (or probably shouldn't) exist, which included fare like "watermelon popsicles with chocolate chips." It appears to have been conjured with new image-generation tools. But it was not alone. Restaurants that sell food exclusively through delivery apps like DoorDash and Grubhub have also used images of unidentifiable breaded objects on their pasta, according to 404 Media.

Topping them was a recent Willy Wonka exhibition in Glasgow, Scotland, whose AI-generated posters suggested that ticket holders would stroll through a vivid world of ceiling-high lollipops and chocolate bars. They instead entered a bleak, grey warehouse scattered with some cheap props.

Generative AI has allowed for even more sinister marketing, something Olga Loiek found out the hard way last December. The 20-year-old student was dabbling in the art of being a YouTube influencer when she discovered dozens of video advertisements of her hawking candy on Chinese social media sites. Loiek doesn't speak the language but her unauthorized likeness did.

A raft of other influencers and celebrities have been cloned to endorse everything from language apps to self-help courses, all without their permission. But it's surprising that Loiek was picked to front a promotion too. She was a relative greenhorn on YouTube, having only posted eight videos for a month before the deepfaked videos started cropping up. Loiek thinks her clones might have been drawn to her "Slavic" looks to appeal to Chinese consumers who support Russia. "This audience might like my avatar... and in the end they're more likely to buy the product," she says. The deepfakes, which she says were in the hundreds, found their way to the Chinese Instagram-style platform Xiaohongshu and video-sharing site Bilibili.

Loiek's efforts to report the videos to both companies went nowhere. Scroll

through Xiaohongshu long enough and you'll find many other videos of suspiciously artificial influencer promotions. And the issue isn't limited to Chinese apps. Last year, TikTok hosted an ad in which podcaster Joe Rogan and Stanford University neuroscientist Andrew Huberman were cloned to sell supplements for men.

History is littered with innovations that were exploited by unscrupulous marketers. The telephone opened up the floodgates to robocalls and e-mail to spam. Generative AI seems to have opened the door to a new era of fantasy typified by alien-looking shellfish.

It is bad enough for people like Loiek to have their identities stolen and publicized without permission. Now low-level fakery, like the inauthentic food, poses a new challenge for consumers.

One way to address the problem is to become more sceptical about ads on web-based platforms. Social media networks like TikTok and Instagram will need to improve their methods of detection, and regulators should step in.

The UK's main advertising regulator banned two ads from L'Oréal in 2011 over complaints that it had used "excessive air-brushing" on its models. But that was the era of Photoshop. Now the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is carefully reviewing the use of generative AI, a spokesman for the regulator tells me, which could lead to new guidelines for advertisers this year. The technology shouldn't be used, for example, to exaggerate a product's efficacy, the spokesman said. The US Federal Trade Commission says it's also "focusing intensely" on the problem.

Disclaimers could be a way to tackle the issue. In 2021, the Norwegian government amended its laws so that advertisers and influencers had to disclose their use of digitally altered images of people. The goal was to target unrealistic beauty standards, but similar forced disclaimers on AI-generated ads could increase public awareness of entirely conjured 'photos' or 'videos.'

Of course, policymakers can't do much to stop whoever cloned Olga Loiek. That seems to be the crux of the problem. "I will keep doing it," she says of her nascent YouTube channel. "But I think there has to be some regulation in place. I just don't know who to reach out to."

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GUEST VIEW

Cine paradox: When good films meet sloppy marketing

SAURABH VARMA



is a director and script writer.

Movie marketing in the Indian film industry is like navigating a labyrinth of missed opportunities and hastily executed ideas, often accompanied by oversized budgets. After more than 100 years of Indian cinema, movie marketing seems stuck in a rut of recycled gimmicks presented as disruptive ideas by hustlers whose main audience appears to be film producers rather than a relevant target audience. In a business where a largely perishable product must quickly make an impact within limited resources, content marketing can't just be about random ideas favoured by a select few. It needs a meticulously planned strategy that has been brainstormed even before a film's title is conceived.

The Indian film industry is far more intricate and dynamic than its nickname 'Bollywood' implies. Yet, myths surround content marketing. Fragmented approaches and numerous one-man-show agencies dominate the landscape, with more than half a dozen freelancers typically managing differ-

ent aspects of marketing for one film. From promotional design and poster art to digital marketing and media planning, this often leads to disjointed campaigns that fail to resonate with audiences. Often, the focus is on pleasing film stars and producers rather than achieving any real impact.

Meanwhile, over-the-top (OTT) platforms in India have transformed entertainment consumption. But instead of leveraging their own digital databases for geo-targeted advertising, the stakeholders sometimes allocate significant resources to traditional outdoor publicity, which can be costly with questionable returns. While outdoor ads work as reminders, they do little to achieve deeper brand impact and recall.

Adding to the problem is the opacity that surrounds marketing expenditure. There are no reliable reference numbers available, let alone tabulated data, and surprisingly, no one seems to be asking for it either. Half-baked strategies based on assumptions result in a substantial portion of the budget being taken by agencies and their commissions. Without data transparency and standardized pricing, it's impossible to assess the true effectiveness of film marketing. One wonders why there hasn't been any concerted effort to capture the effectiveness of

marketing initiatives. Perhaps it's because it is considered a specialized but boring behind-the-scenes function.

Then there's the enigma of invisible music revenues, shrouded in more mystery than the Bermuda Triangle. Despite large investments in songs and music by creators, returns on soundtracks have remained elusive for decades, with little that lets us assess song-wise performance, musical reach or its pre- and post-release impact. One wonders why such crucial data is never made public for the benefit of the country's entertainment industry. The solution is simple. Someone needs to voice an opinion and ask for data, but nobody does it collectively.

Sincere film marketing initiatives lack crucial demographic data on the audience in every region. This could save studios or producers time and money. Why do they not bother to analyse cinema-going patterns or the gender-wise breakdown of film audiences before marketing content, like Hollywood does? Hollywood films like

The Twilight and many others are a result of strategic research that detected demand for content specially designed for a young audience. Quickie reports extracted from small consumer-research focus groups only offer a glimpse into audience behaviour, leaving many critical questions unanswered. It is unclear if any initiative is taken to conduct thorough research that asks the right questions and could propel a film to success.

There exist numerous examples of films that initially failed as a result of misguided positioning, such as *12th Fail*, *Sirf Ek Banda Kafi Hai* and *Andhadhun*. These films gained traction much after their release, thanks to good word-of-mouth, gaining which is a science in itself.

In recent times, a few films have created a market buzz despite mediocre content. But it is a wonder how so much money is spent on content like *Archies* and *Indian Police Force*, exhausting enormous marketing budgets, without questioning the effectiveness of the offerings. Are such heavy marketing

expenses justified? On the other hand, modestly marketed but outstanding entertainers like *Gullak*, *Maamla Legal Hai* and *Panchayat* attract audiences on their own appeal.

Amid such a landscape, smaller films featuring less-known talent struggle to find their audience. Many have not realized their true potential, as they were released at the wrong time or found themselves on an inappropriate platform.

Until the industry unites to address the leakage of marketing expenditure and embraces transparency, the true potential of Indian content will remain unrealized. This is an issue for the film and content industry that should be taken seriously and discussed at various forums. Every film has a market that its marketers must find within a very short period of time and budget constraints. It's high time someone tried to unravel the mystery and chart a course toward more effective, data-driven marketing strategies that genuinely resonate with appropriate audiences. While this may not be quite as interesting as shots taken in the dark and the 'airport look' that dominates almost all film content websites, it is clearly the way ahead. For Indian films to be marketed well, a far less casual and much more strategic approach needs to be taken.



THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE
OUR LIVES BEGIN TO END THE DAY WE BECOME
SILENT ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER.
— MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

BETWEEN THE RULES

In framing CAA Rules, government has paid scant heed to questions asked of it. All eyes are now on Supreme Court

HINDU, SIKH, BUDDHIST, Jain or Parsi migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who entered the country before December 31, 2014 now have clarity about the procedures and paperwork required to apply for Indian citizenship. Four years after Parliament enacted the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 (CAA), which excludes the Muslims, the Union Home Ministry has issued the Rules to give effect to the law. After the notification, Home Minister Amit Shah posted on X, "The PM has delivered on another commitment." CAA was amongst the key items in BJP's election manifesto of 2019 and the party is indeed right in claiming that the government has ticked another ideological box with the 39-page gazette notification. And, who can have a quarrel with the country opening its doors to vulnerable people from the neighbourhood? Immensely disquieting, however, is that the government has chosen to go ahead with the rules while the Act faces legal challenges. The CAA sparked protests in different parts of the country four years ago. The Rules do nothing to mitigate the Act's discriminatory foundation that is at odds with the constitutional Right to Equality as well as the idea of a plural India, conceived at the time of Independence.

The government has maintained that Muslims have been excluded because Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh are Islamic countries. However, more than 200 petitions have challenged CAA in the SC on the ground that it violates Article 14, which affirms that "the State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India". In the Court, the government will not just be tested on whether it cherry-picked the three neighbouring countries to keep Muslims out. The question that it will also have to answer is this: If CAA was born out of concern for the vulnerable, why not extend it to the Rohingyas from Myanmar, the Ahmadiyas from Pakistan or even Tamils from Sri Lanka? The government's notifying the Rules before answering the legal challenge could do more harm than good to those it wants to rescue. It could expose a refugee who receives citizenship to another regime of uncertainty.

CAA has further alarmed all those who have stakes in peace and calm in the Northeast. The December 2014 cut-off has created unease in Assam, where migration, identity and citizenship have been fraught issues for more than four decades. A case on the cut-off date for migrants to the state is before the Supreme Court. Moreover, the NRC process has created more faultlines than it has settled in Assam and the issue of who is a "foreigner" continues to fester. Now, the notification of the CAA Rules has, reportedly, ignited another round of protests in the state. In the run-up to an election campaign that portends to be divisive, the government has framed the Rules, paying little heed to questions asked of it. All eyes are now on the Supreme Court.

TRADE GAINS

India-EFTA pact signals greater openness, a willingness to enter into broader and deeper agreements

OVER THE PAST few years, the Narendra Modi government has been actively pursuing trade agreements. It has signed an economic cooperation and trade agreement with Australia and a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with the UAE. Talks are also on with the UK and the EU. And on Sunday, after 16 years of negotiation, the government has signed another trade agreement with the four-nation European Free Trade Association (EFTA), comprising Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. These are welcome developments. They signal greater openness and desire to push through trade agreements and a change from the times when negotiations would be abandoned midway.

As per the newly signed agreement, the EFTA states shall aim to increase FDI into India by \$50 billion within 10 years, and another \$50 billion in the five years thereafter. This could facilitate the generation of one million direct jobs in the country. To provide some perspective — EFTA investment stood at \$10.7 billion in 2022. Switzerland is India's largest trading partner in this bloc of nations, followed by Norway. In fact, India has a trade deficit with Switzerland, largely due to gold imports. After the treaty comes into effect, the EFTA nations will see a reduction in tariffs. As reported in this paper, the agreement will result in the "elimination of duties on most industrial goods exported to India", such as pharmaceutical products, machinery, watches, fertilisers, medicine, chemical products and others. India is offering "82.7 per cent of its tariff lines which cover 95.3 per cent" of the grouping's exports. However, most agricultural items have reportedly been kept outside the purview of this deal. EFTA's "market access offer covers 100 per cent of non-agri products". The services sector also forms a vital part of this trade agreement. The agreement would help stimulate services exports in areas such as information technology and facilitate the movement of key skilled personnel.

The Indian government had set an ambitious target of \$2 trillion in exports of goods and services by 2030. Achieving this will require policy action on a range of issues — from lowering tariffs to entering into deeper, more expansive free trade agreements while safeguarding the country's interests. It also calls for ensuring that measures are taken so that the benefits from these trade agreements are fully reaped. At this critical juncture in the country's development trajectory, it must push ahead.

SATWIK-CHIRAG

Their success at French Open, and their consistency, make them contenders for a badminton doubles gold at Paris Olympics

INA SOMEWHAT unprecedented occurrence in Indian sport, one discipline is nurturing dreams of an Olympic gold, five months before the Paris Games. Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty have struck the sort of consistency on the year-round circuit that is rare for Indian badminton, not only in terms of the number of titles but also in winning crunch battles. Along with javelin champion Neeraj Chopra and boxing talent Nikhat Zareen, Satwik-Chirag have kicked off discussions of not just any coloured medal, but if they can win the Paris gold. Such talk used to be a preserve of badminton powerhouses — China, Korea, Malaysia, Indonesia and Denmark.

It all started with the Thomas Cup team win in 2022, though the unassuming duo had won four titles before that. India always faltered at team events before that because of weak doubles, but Satwik-Chirag set that score right two summers ago. 2023 though was the genuine breakout phase, of not just hovering in the Top 5 zone, but reaching World No 1 and then guarding that top position. They won the Indonesian title at Istora Stadium, the world's noisiest and most intimidating arena. Satwik-Chirag more importantly nailed the Asian Games gold, which is not only prestigious, but the top KRA of all top Asian badminton nations. Since December, the duo have made four tournament finals displaying unreal consistency, which makes them bona-fide gold contenders at Paris.

There isn't a single pairing on the tour that Satwik-Chirag hasn't beaten. While the two have won both on the pro circuit and in important majors, they are still without a World Championship title, though they have a bronze from 2022. At the last edition, they faltered before ensuring a podium. Despite badminton's popularity and Satwik-Chirag's consistency, they are not yet in the popularity stratosphere like Saina Nehwal or PV Sindhu. Their French Open title on Sunday didn't even figure on television, with producers preferring women's cricket and football. Maybe, it will take an Olympic medal to carve their legacy.



INDIRA JAISING

WHILE SOME PEOPLE associated with the ruling party and government have announced that once the magic figure of 400 MPs is reached the Constitution will be amended, others have denied it. Regardless of this agenda, the dramatic pre-election announcement of the Rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 as the fulfilment of a poll promise furthers the resolve of the government to undermine India's constitutional secularism. Four years after the enactment of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, on the cusp of the announcement of the Lok Sabha polls, the Union government on Monday notified the Rules framed thereunder laying down the procedure for granting of citizenship under the Act.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024, have given rise to celebrations on the one hand and calls for a stay of the implementation of the CAA 2019, pending the Supreme Court's decision, on the other. Wisdom lies in staying the implementation of the Act since once citizenship is granted it is difficult to restore the status quo ante. Citizenship, after all, is the right to have rights — including the right to vote — which will have been exercised.

The CAA 2019 enables the grant of citizenship to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian "illegal immigrants" from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh who entered India on or before December 31, 2014. The Act excludes Muslims from its purview and thus discriminates against them based on their religion alone. It has been alleged in the public domain by the government that the Act is based on giving fast-track citizenship to persecuted persons, but there is no mention of persecution in the statute or Rules, nor is any proof of persecution called for by the Rules prior to conferment of citizenship.

The Constitution confers citizenship by way of birth, descent and migration, regardless of religion. The provisions are codified in Articles 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10. These Articles reflect the secular nature — a basic feature — of the Constitution. The Citizenship Act (1955) was enacted by Parliament to regulate the grant and termination of citizenship. The 1955 Act also does not make religion a criterion for the grant of citizenship. With the amendment

Welcome all

Instead of CAA, government would do better to sign Geneva Convention on Refugees

and Rules, citizenship will be granted by naturalisation based on religion alone.

The Rules which have been notified list out a total of nine documents which can be submitted with the application to prove that the applicant is a national of Afghanistan, Bangladesh or Pakistan. There is no need to prove persecution, it is presumed! Entry 5 in Schedule IA says, "identity document of any kind issued by the Government of Afghanistan or Bangladesh or Pakistan or any other government authorities or government agencies in these countries would also suffice to prove nationality."

Schedule IB lists a total of 20 documents to prove that the applicant has entered India on or before December 31, 2014. Any one of these will suffice to prove the claim. These include a copy of the visa and immigration stamp on arrival in India; registration certificate or residential permit issued by the Foreigners Regional Registration Officer (FRRO) or Foreigners Registration Officer (FRO) in India; slip issued by the Census enumerators in India; government-issued licence or certificate or permit in India (including driving licence, Aadhaar card, etc.); ration card of the applicant issued in India; any letter issued by the government or court to the applicant with official stamp; birth certificate of the applicant issued in India; marriage certificate, etc. One wonders whether the same liberal approach to proof of residence would be used for persons claiming to be Indian citizens when the National Register of Citizens (NRC) is prepared.

Apart from presuming persecution and liberalising proof of origin, the federal structure of administration has been centralised. Prior to these Rules, an application seeking citizenship was to be made to the district collector concerned. Now, the application of those seeking the benefit of the CAA is to be made to the empowered committee formed by the Union government.

The pending challenges to the CAA have pointed out that the Act violates Article 14 in that it denies equality before the law and equal protection of laws. It is worth recalling that Article 14 applies not just to citizens but to all persons. The CAA denies equal benefit of

fast-track citizenship by registration or naturalisation to similarly placed Muslims. It also leaves out of consideration persons of nations other than those mentioned in the Act. The ostensible object of the CAA — to give benefits of citizenship to persecuted minorities in these three countries — seems like nothing more than a cover to favour Hindus since it is a known fact that in those very countries, Muslims belonging to different sects too are persecuted. There can be no presumption that the majority community will not persecute members of its own who dissent from the mainstream of politics. It is well known that the Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan are one of the most persecuted minorities. Others have pointed out that the CAA 2019 does not extend the benefit of fast-track citizenship to persecuted minorities in neighbouring countries such as Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where the Rohingyas and Tamils are persecuted minorities, respectively.

Protesters in Assam point out the internal contradictions in the law. For example, Section 6A of the Citizenship Act, 1955, grants citizenship to those who have migrated to Assam prior to March 24, 1971. With CAA, even those who came after 1971 but before December 2014 will be granted citizenship. It's hugely ironic that as recently as January this year, the central government defended Section 6A in the Supreme Court while some local groups stoutly opposed it. Perhaps this was done in the mistaken belief that if the 1971 cut-off date is upheld, so will the 2014 date. But the cut-off of 1971 did not discriminate based on religion whereas the 2014 date does.

While the policy of protecting persecuted persons is more than welcome, the solution is to grant them all refugee status, regardless of which religion they belong to. India must sign the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1961 to demonstrate its commitment to the persecuted and stop persecuting its own minorities. Failing this, the CAA will be seen as a project to establish a Hindu nation.

The writer is a former Additional Solicitor General of India



SANDIP ROY

BIG LITTLE LIES

Self-help gurus exploit our relentless anxiety to upgrade ourselves

WHEN I WAS a child, I came across a copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* among my father's books. Ours was certainly not the only Indian home to have the book. I didn't realise it at the time, but I had stumbled upon my very first self-help book. That book was originally written in 1936 in the middle of the Great Depression. In hindsight, one can see its appeal in an America in the grip of a terrible economic downturn. It sold the idea that you could somehow bootstrap your way out of the mess. Self-help books promise a secret formula to individual success, an irresistible lure for those who feel powerless against huge economic forces. But they also need a charismatic salesperson with a great life story, preferably one that follows the rags-to-riches pipeline.

Self-help megastar Jay Shetty is now being accused of having fabricated or exaggerated parts of his life story. The story as put out by Shetty is that he grew up in the UK, went to a lecture by the monk Gauranga Das because his friend promised to take him to a bar afterwards, saw the light and lived several years in an ashram in India. Then he decided that instead of becoming a monk, his mission was to share that wisdom far and wide. The likes of Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey appeared on his podcast *On Purpose*, one of the 10 most-subscribed-to podcasts in the US last year. Jennifer Lopez was so impressed by him she had him officiate her wedding with Ben Affleck. No wonder people pay thousands of

dollars to attend the Jay Shetty Certification School's online course. Who would not want to have a Shetty life?

Now, an expose in *The Guardian* notes Shetty didn't quite stumble upon Eastern mysticism. He grew up in a Hare Krishna family. He has been accused of plagiarism and using people's content without attribution. *The Guardian* says that most of the time he says he spent at an ashram in India was actually in Bhaktivedanta Manor, a Tudor estate outside London, making YouTube videos. Shetty's lawyers are trying to refute these allegations. But there is no evidence yet that his most high-profile followers have dumped him. Whether Shetty's life story had a lot of holes in it or not, it does not mean people don't want the life he created for himself.

The real appeal of a self-help book is the agency it pretends to confer upon you. Self-help gurus do that by claiming they have a step-by-step guide to whatever you need. It might be a slimmer you, a richer you, a more confident you or a you that lasts longer in bed. In short, a happier you. It also promises the way to that person who is there inside you. You just need the guru's secret key to unlock it. As a boy, I wanted to be a taller me. I wrote to some address in Karol Bagh, New Delhi for a self-help guide on how to grow taller in six months. I got a sheaf of xeroxed exercises in the mail. They didn't work.

However, the lure remains. Shetty had an added advantage — his cultural origin. For long, the West has preached the mantra of in-

dividualism to the East. Indians have swallowed that hook, line and Dale Carnegie. Then disaffected Westerners, fed up with the relentless pursuit of materialism, came looking for the meaning of life in the East. Now, we have the Jay Shettys who have turned that Eastern spiritualism into a self-help commodity which they peddle back to the West, for example, through his latest bestseller, *8 Rules of Love* (2023), which explores four "Vedic" stages of love (with simple exercises).

The irony is that self-help is predicated on a firm belief in individualism. But the guru promises that each of us can become like him or her if we follow their course, no matter how different we are as individuals. We can all become Smarter, Better, Faster and eventually Superbetter once we know The Secret. But it's the self-help gurus who know the real secret about us. They understand that behind the constant pressure to upgrade our phones and gadgets lies a relentless anxiety that we are the ones who need to really upgrade. We may snicker at Shetty but that does not change our basic fear of inadequacy, and the hope that we can fix it somehow with a simple life hack.

In 1936, Dale Carnegie was teaching us how to win friends and influence people. In 2024, when every other person wants to be a social media influencer, nothing has really changed. Except now we are really looking to win not friends but followers.

Roy is a novelist and the author of Don't Let Him Know

MARCH 13, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

CM'S CORRUPTION CASE

IN A DRAMATIC development, the Congress (I) high command reversed its earlier decision to save former chief minister A R Antulay by amending the Prevention of Corruption Act of Maharashtra. Only a few hours before that, the Maharashtra Congress (I) legislature party had unanimously endorsed the party high command's directive to amend the Act. CM Vasant Rao Patil explained that PM Gandhi had favoured the amendment.

UP PARLIAMENT CHAOS

BOTH HOUSES OF the UP state legislature had

to be adjourned twice. Vidhan Parishad for two-and-a-half hours following the suspension of two members and Vidhan Sabha for half an hour upon the suspension of a Janata Party member. Almost the entire opposition stormed into the well, shouting slogans when Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Ammar Rizvi moved a resolution for suspension.

FARMERS' PROTEST

THOUSANDS OF FARMERS began indefinite picketing outside Punjab Raj Bhavan to protest against the "failure" of the government, both at the Centre and in the state, to ensure remunerative prices for their produce, besides "un-

called for" increase in the power rates and the market fee. The heavily barricaded Raj Bhavan has been surrounded by the farmers who came for their "final battle".

RAIL TRACK EXPLOSION

A PASSENGER TRAIN had a narrow escape when a bomb exploded between Kalinwali and Ram Mandi in Haryana on the Hisar-Bhatinda section of the Northern Railway, minutes after the train had passed the spot on its way to Bhatinda in Punjab. A portion of the railway track was ripped off by the explosion suspected to be engineered by terrorists from Punjab.



11 THE IDEAS PAGE

Bracing for Trump

His possible presidency is worrying US allies. New Delhi is well-poised on the security front but may need a new framework for economic and trade cooperation



A RECENT HEADLINE in *Nikkei Asia*, a leading English-language publication from Japan, said America's allies in the Indo-Pacific "tremble at the prospect of Trump's return". The mood is even grimmer in Europe. A few days ago, Donald Trump warned Europeans that he would let Russia invade allies who do not pay their share of the defence burden in NATO. Whether he was serious or not, there is no denying Trump's visceral hostility to allies in Asia and Europe — he sees them as free-riding on America's shoulders.

As the chances of Donald Trump winning the grudge match against President Joe Biden brighten, the apprehensions of US allies in Europe and Asia are getting darker. Even if Trump does not win, his Republican Party's growing opposition to foreign commitments and a deepening sense of "America First" promise to produce major changes in Eurasian geopolitics. On the face of it, this does not look too threatening to India. After all, India is not an "ally" of the US and does not depend on its military forces for its security. A closer look, however, points to more complex consequences of Trump's "America First" policies. Any American military retrenchment from Eurasia will dramatically alter the balance of power in this region and produce outcomes that are patently unfavourable to India.

Eurasia without America will be a dream come true for those strategists in Moscow and Beijing who fancy their chances of building a new regional order dominated by them. It's a nightmare for the neighbours of Russia and China. Although Moscow and Beijing have no love for Trump, they relish the prospect of exploiting the divisions that Trump might sharpen among the US and its allies.

Although India rarely debates the consequences of a Europe without America, it is acutely conscious of the dangers of a unipolar Asia dominated by China. It is possible to see that without American presence, Asia could easily slip into the Chinese orbit. As a maritime power, Delhi's natural preference is for a multipolar order in Eurasia that is not dominated by one power or an axis of continental powers. Yet, Delhi must prepare for major changes in Eurasia amidst the current volatility in US domestic politics and its inevitable global impact.

But first, we must note the contradiction between the allied apprehensions about Trump and his record in office during 2017-21. It was indeed during his presidency that the US National Security Strategy moved Washington away from wasting its energies battling insurgencies in the badlands of the Greater Middle East to dealing with the challenges presented by an increasingly assertive Russia and China.

For all the accusations that Trump was putty in the hands of the Russian leader Vladimir Putin, his administration ramped up the pressures against Moscow. More consequentially, the Trump Administration began the bold reversal of four decades of Washington's strategy to befriend Beijing and expand the US economic interdependence with China. Trump imposed new tariffs on China, began an effort to reduce economic exposure to Beijing, and revived the Quadrilateral Forum as part of a new Indo-Pacific strategy to balance China. Biden has built on the decisive Asian strategy articulated by Trump.



If Trump's record is so impressive, why are many of America's friends worried about his return to the White House? Three factors stand out. First, many chancelleries around the world believe that the "adults in the room" and the American "deep state" restrained Trump from pursuing his convictions on allies as free riders during his presidency. In both Europe and Asia, Trump came close to taking radical steps against allies, such as withdrawing US troops, but held back. This time, America's allies worry that Trump will be less restrained. They also fear that Trump's impulsive character and transnational approach will be more on display and do irreparable damage to long-standing US alliances.

Second, despite the widespread Trump-bashing in the US and allied foreign policy establishments, the former president is making an important political point. US allies can't expect the American taxpayer to spend blood and treasure forever defending their partners who are unwilling to do their bit. The traditional internationalists — both liberal and conservative — believe it is a price worth paying to sustain American leadership of the international system and the benefits that accrue from it. For Trump and a significant section of the Republican Party, the entrenched "globalism" of the US foreign policy elite is an important part of the problem. It is a view with some resonance on the left of the US political spectrum that equates American globalism with a disastrous penchant for empire.

Third, Trump rejects the long-standing assumption in the American establishment that generous non-reciprocal access to the US market should be granted in return for

On the security front, India's outlook is positive. The US search for capable partners who are willing to contribute to regional security in Eurasia fits nicely with Delhi's own great power ambitions. The quicker India moves on building its military capabilities and the greater its willingness to deploy it for collective defence with its partners, the faster its rise in the Eurasian security hierarchy will be. On the economic front, though, Delhi has a challenge. That India is the 'tariff king' is stuck in Trump's head, and he frequently lashed out at India's protectionism.

geopolitical favours from allies. This seemed a good deal for the US when it was an economic colossus towering over the ruins of post-war Eurasia, and it needed to win strong military allies in the war against global communism. Trump and the anti-globalist tribe argue that the American people and its economy have paid a huge price — in terms of lost manufacturing jobs — for this grand bargain. They are no longer willing to trade the US market for geopolitical gains. In his first term, Trump not only targeted China with tariffs but also allies in Europe and Asia. Trump is now threatening to impose an across-the-board tariff of 10 per cent on all imports into the US. He also promises to slap tariffs up to 60 per cent on imports from China.

Where does all this leave India? On the security front, India's outlook is positive. The US search for capable partners who are willing to contribute to regional security in Eurasia fits nicely with Delhi's own great power ambitions. The quicker India moves on building its military capabilities and the greater its willingness to deploy it for collective defence with its partners, the faster its rise in the Eurasian security hierarchy will be. On the economic front, though, Delhi has a challenge. That India is the "tariff king" is stuck in Trump's head, and he frequently lashed out at India's protectionism. India's efforts to negotiate a trade agreement with the Trump Administration did not succeed. Since Trump left office, the US has become a more important economic partner for India; trade and technology ties with America are also the most promising. Given the high commercial stakes in this relationship, Delhi will need to think creatively about a new framework for trade cooperation with Washington.

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The writer is an advocate

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"A kind of politics is taking root where everything is justified to stay in power, including pardoning convicts to get their support to prop up ruling coalitions... It is about time our ruling class realised that the rule of law is above and beyond their petty political calculations."
— THE KATHMANDU POST

A long-awaited ghar wapsi

Citizenship (Amendment) Act undoes decades of injustice on marginalised people. Opposition's resistance to it is disappointing



IN HIS LETTER of resignation, recalling one of the many state-sponsored atrocities on the Scheduled Castes in East Pakistan, Jogendra Nath Mandal, one of the key architects of Pakistan, who served as its first Minister of Law and Labour, observed, "The armed police came and the local Muslims also joined them. They not only raided some houses of the Namasudras but mercilessly beat both men and women, destroyed their properties and took away valuables. The merciless beating of a pregnant woman resulted in abortion on the spot. This brutal action on the part of the local authority created panic over a large area." Subsequent massacres of Dalits in Marichjhapi, Sundarbans, in 1979, and in Sandeshkhali in 2024 are an indication of the systemic rot against socially vulnerable communities in this region. One of the alleged culprits in Sandeshkhali, Shahjahan Sheikh, is also accused of unleashing violence on women from the SC/ST communities under the patronage of the ruling party in the state. Therefore, the politics of Dalit-Muslim unity often ignited by stakeholders for the pursuit of power has no historical resonance. There must be an academic interrogation of the treatment of Dalits and other marginalised sections in the Indian Subcontinent.

The Ministry of Home Affairs' decision to notify the rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 must be viewed from a historical perspective. In 1947, when India was partitioned, the Hindu population in Pakistan was about 24 per cent. Today, it is not even 1 per cent. In 1947, Hindu population in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) was 30 per cent. Today, it is about 7 per cent. Where did they disappear? The complete absence of any human-rights discourse (international and domestic) around the persecuted minorities of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh is appalling. As per a report by the Hindu American Foundation, "Abduction and forced conversion of Hindu girls is rampant (Approx 1,000 Hindu and Christian girls in Pakistan are abducted and converted to Islam annually. Between 2004-18, there were 7,430 reported cases of kidnappings of Hindu girls in the Sindh province alone, while the actual number of cases is much higher.)"

Dalits and tribal communities have finally become a factor in the domestic political narrative for the right reasons but the canvas of politics around them needs a broader discussion. The CAA rules are intended to provide refuge to the thousands of people who have become stateless over the decades and have moved from across the border, predominantly owing to Islamic

fundamentalism and sectarian violence. In a report by a leading Indian newspaper, it was found that "of the 5,764 eligible families that have applied for citizenship, 70 per cent of them are Dalits". It is shocking to see the Congress party and its senior leadership opposing a law that is a step in the direction of the fulfilment of our constitutional obligation. Noted thinker on Dalit issues and senior advocate Nitin Meshram welcomed the decision on X: "People from Bengal who elected Babasaheb Ambedkar and sent him to the Constituent Assembly to uplift the marginalised sections will finally get the Indian citizenship after waiting for almost 75 years. Nothing can be better news than this for the Bahujan community in India."

There are similar examples from Western democracies like the US and the UK where preferential treatment for citizenship was extended to persecuted minorities. US Senator Frank Lautenberg in 1989-90 led a similar campaign for persecuted minorities in the Soviet Union and Iran. Under this amendment, persons from minority communities such as Christians, Bahais and Jewish people from Iran were given refuge and citizenship eventually, primarily on the ground of being persecuted. The Nationality and Borders Act of the United Kingdom also offered nationality, asylum, and immigration, including to victims of slavery and human trafficking. Where will the Hindus suffering from institutional oppression go for protection? India is a natural home to Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and people following multiple other faiths.

The age of suspended disbelief for Opposition parties is sadly continuing on this affirmative legislation. As a student of law and a researcher, I have yet to find a provision in this Act that disallows a person from the Muslim community to apply for citizenship. On the contrary, anyone who has come to India after the cut-off date in December 2014, regardless of their faith, will be treated at par. Rahul Gandhi will ask mediapersons about their caste in an open press conference but will not be mindful of the caste of the people belonging to persecuted minorities in Pakistan. This is opposition for the sake of opposition. Lalu Prasad and Akhilesh Yadav will speak about backward communities but will rarely go beyond the political interest of their families. Women from the Matua (Dalit) community in Bengal were seen celebrating after the notification of the rules by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

This Act undoes decades of injustice on Dalits from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Nothing can be a more fitting tribute to Savitribai Phule, BR Ambedkar and Jogendra Nath Mandal than to pave the way for a genuine ghar wapsi of people. It is an emotional moment for the millions of Dalits not only from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh but also across India who are cherishing the return of their people after an endless wait.

The writer is assistant professor at Patna University and adviser to the Dalit Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

PUBLIC INFORMATION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Who paid whom' (IE, March 12). The data from SBI ledgers on electoral bonds may turn out to be a letdown if one is looking for a straight line connecting the real donor to a specific party. KYC notwithstanding, the purchaser of the bond could well be masked. It will take a lot of time to probe the real donor through digital forensics. We already know the amount received by each party from the bonds. In the meantime, parties will no doubt push through inspired posts of the presumed nexus, using digital media overreach all through the election campaign, against each other. The electorate will be no wiser until a clear picture of donor-party conjunction emerges, far later. But then public memory being short, the data will reside only in record books.
R Narayanan, Mumbai

RIGHT TO DISSENT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Let them speak' (IE, March 11). It is disappointing that the SC had to issue a directive to educate police on the freedom of speech. If a citizen can't question the establishment, can't doubt the set rules and accepts almost everything remaining silent, it reflects a moribund state. Our law needs to be dynamic in an ever-changing society. Suppressing dissent, in the words of the late Justice Fali Nariman has "a chilling effect" on the freedom of speech. The right to dissent is core and is implicit in the concept of freedom of speech. But that can also not mean free rein to protest everything. A forward-looking and educated society must welcome rationality.
Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

BIG SCREEN SPECTACLE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Nolan's world' (IE, March 12). *Oppenheimer's* success at the Oscars is a significant milestone in the film industry. Christopher Nolan's Best Director win after eight nominations underscores his impact on cinema. Seven awards for the film, including Best Picture, highlight the enduring appeal of big-screen spectacles and traditional filmmaking amidst a landscape dominated by OTT content. The relevance of *Oppenheimer* in today's context, touching on themes like nuclear weapons and AI threats, adds depth for viewers. Nolan's ability to engage audiences with historical narratives and thought-provoking storytelling reflects his prowess as a filmmaker.
Dattatray S Giri, Thane

Seven lessons from my guru

Fali Nariman taught me value of forgiveness, integrity and a lifelong love for learning



OUR MOST REVERED Fali S Nariman, who died last month, had the prophetic ability to foresee events with wisdom, clarity, intuition and a deep understanding of human nature. His writings and actions will continue to inspire and guide us. I joined him in 1986, through the Bar Council of India placement, for one year. He had a great love for learning till the end. His thoughts were like a cascading waterfall, always moving, never stopping. At first, I did not understand his fast-thinking, hurried approach. But when I stayed with him and his compassionate wife Bapsi, I felt their peace and love. I started aligning myself with their good habits and values. A silent agreement between a great mentor and a seeker who wanted to learn was thus made.

In chapter five of his autobiography, *Before Memory Fades*, he shares 28 rules for young lawyers. I wish to talk about how he thought and what he valued. I learnt from him in his "chamber of hard knocks" and wish to talk about his habits of conserving energy and always channelling it in the right direction.

One: How did he think? He neither emptied his mind like a monk nor did yoga. He let thoughts flow without judgement or attachment. He stayed calm and focused on those thoughts, even in his subconscious mind and when asleep. He would get up at odd hours of the night and call me to discuss new

thoughts on a subject. His way of deeper thinking is hard to understand. It's like a compass that helps us find direction. To learn from him, I had to be silent and focused, with my ears open. I had to read and reflect more. His guidance helped me to understand him better. I learned to maintain equipoise in my thoughts and find stillness around his dynamism at home and in the courts. It wasn't just a goal, but a silent journey that we went on together for decades. Ours was not just a guru-shishya relationship — it went beyond that.

Two: He knew how to master his thoughts and could remain focused on multiple things even amidst the noise. While working on a case, he wrote articles, prepared speeches and settled other petitions with ease. He cared for minor details, once telling me, "God is there". Look sharp, he told me. He valued time. He read a lot and wrote down all his ideas and concepts on small slips that he would keep in his pocket, like valuables, and which he would later develop. I picked up this habit too — it helped me evolve with him. Whenever we had free time in court, we would visit the magnificent Judges Library, like students seeking more knowledge, especially the gold mine that is the collection of foreign journals.

Three: Forgiveness is a divine virtue, one that very few people have. It was his hall-

mark. If someone was mean or ridiculed him, he would laugh and let it go or ignore it. He often said, don't hold onto bad feelings and try to be forgiving, otherwise your perceptions and outlook of life will be affected. Focus on what makes you happy and don't compare yourself with others — the competition is with your own self. He always said God and goodness are everywhere.

Four: He knew how to keep away from bad influences and ignore unkind people. He chose a smart way to make choices by diverting his energy towards what he believed in. He focused on doing his best in life and listening to his heart. He did not take either praise or criticism seriously because both can upset the balance of the mind. He said to me that an individual's charm depends on his will power and how much awareness he has developed. To remain happy, make your life easy and simple.

Five: He always loved truthfulness, no matter how inconvenient it may be. He stayed true to his own integrity, like the needle of a compass, and ignored manipulators and liars. He never gave legal opinions that he was not convinced of. Human rights and independence of the judiciary were issues that were close to his heart.

Six: In any matter, he would reflect carefully and did not mix his subjective feelings with the objective facts. His mantra for clear

thinking was: "Don't subjectify the object and don't objectify the subject." He didn't let his strong personality get in the way of clear thinking. He remained detached in order to think better. When working on a case, he explored all angles and prepared well from the other side's perspective as well. He was a creative genius in court and nobody could ever guess his next strategic move! Even at the end of his life, at the age of 95, his memory never faded and his legal acumen and clarity of mind remained outstanding.

Seven: When preparing any case, we would, after going over the facts, hunt for materials and cases from across the world. Long-haul conferences brought objectivity and excellence. This grinding process of rewriting, recycling and polishing continued for days until perfection was attained. He would then pick out points and argue them before the court. He never crossed his *Lakshman Rekha* and respected the judges.

Two days before he died, he spoke to me about his two great law teachers, Yeshwant Chandrachud and Nani Palkhivala, and how they inculcated the love of law in him.

It was a great joy working with my prophet. He taught me not only what to see but how to see it consciously. May his grace and wisdom shine on all of us forever.

The writer is an advocate



A tale of two

BJP, Congress have taken contrasting approaches to building alliances

After raising its stakes in the forthcoming general election by declaring a target of 400 seats along with allies, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is mopping up political partners across the country to resurrect the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Just as the BJP is courting allies with alacrity, the putative alliance of Opposition parties that appeared on the horizon in mid-2023 is unravelling, if at all it ever took any concrete form. The BJP has announced a tie-up with Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party which had parted ways in 2018 over the issue of unfulfilled promises for Andhra Pradesh. Mr. Naidu has slowly made his way back to the NDA by distancing himself from the Opposition. The BJP is assiduously courting the Biju Janata Dal, to revive their alliance formed between 1998-2009, in Odisha. The Akali Dal is waiting for the farmers' agitation to blow over before it could make its next move, potentially to march back to the NDA camp. Efforts are on to bring the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam back into the NDA's fold in Tamil Nadu. The most striking of all the recent realignments has been that of Janata Dal (United) chief and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who is now championing a third consecutive term for the BJP at the Centre, after calling for its defeat in the preceding months.

A corresponding disarray is evident in the Opposition camp, as parties and individual leaders are jumping on the BJP bandwagon. The emaciated INDIA bloc also suffers from incoherence with allies such as the Trinamool Congress which, after weeks of talks with the Congress, announced candidates for all 42 seats of West Bengal, leaving nothing for the principal Opposition party. To add insult to injury, Mamata Banerjee has fielded cricketer Yusuf Pathan from Baharampur against Congress state President Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena (UBT) has unilaterally announced some candidates, threatening the alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) and the Congress. In Kerala, the Left parties and the Congress, two key proponents of national Opposition unity will be facing off. This usual paradox is starker this time, as Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and CPI leader Annie Raja are opponents in Wayanad. It is not a coincidence that many of the leaders and parties that are taking positions convenient for the BJP, if not openly joining hands with it, are facing investigations by central agencies. This role of the state in influencing party politics in India is a disturbing sign for the health of Indian democracy, and also of the inglorious records of the many Opposition leaders.

Closed and insular

Portugal is not immune to the rise of the far-right in Europe

Portugal, ever since it transitioned into a multiparty democracy in the 1970s, has been seen as one of Europe's most stable liberal democracies. But Sunday's parliamentary election results suggest that the country cannot remain an island when far-right populist parties are on the rise elsewhere in Europe. When 99% of the ballots were counted, the centre-right Social Democratic Party and the Socialist Party won 29% each, with the former taking a narrow lead of 2,058 votes. While the Social Democrats were expected to do well, the surprise was the rapid rise of the far-right Chega party, which ran a campaign promising to "clean up Portugal", clamp down on immigration and implement measures such as chemical castration for some sex offenders. Chega (meaning Enough), which was founded in 2019, had won 7% votes in the 2022 elections, announcing its arrival as a force to reckon with. And in Sunday's elections, it emerged as the third largest party, with 18% votes. Chega's head André Ventura has said the vote is a victory for the right wing (right-of-centre, far-right and conservative parties have won 52% votes among themselves) and has expressed an interest in joining coalition talks. But Social Democratic Party's leader Luis Montenegro has ruled out any tie-up with Chega. As the Socialists have already conceded the election, he is likely to form a minority government.

The Socialist government, led by Goan-origin Prime Minister António Costa, collapsed last year amid investigations into the government's handling of mining and hydrocarbon projects. After the police raided government offices, including the office of Mr. Costa's Chief of Staff and the Ministries of Environment and Infrastructure, Mr. Costa, an elderly statesman of the European left, announced his resignation, saying the probe was "incompatible" with his official duties. The scandal had tarnished the Socialists, but the party that made gains out of it was the anti-establishment Chega whose rise blunted the edge the Social Democrats had had in the early stage of the campaign. Going forward, it will not be easy for Mr. Montenegro. If he sticks to his word of not aligning with Chega and forms a minority government, he will be dependent on other parties to pass legislation. Mr. Costa's leadership during COVID-19 earned him praise and the economy grew faster than the EU average, but other structural economic problems persisted. The country is grappling with persistent low wages and higher inflation, and housing prices have doubled in less than a decade. Portugal has also seen protests over lack of access to health care. The new Prime Minister will have to address these challenges and offer a transparent corruption-free administration, while keeping the far-right, which is accused of xenophobia and racism, at bay.

Intra-group caste variances, equality and the Court's gaze

Soon, a seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India will deliver its judgment in *State of Punjab vs Davinder Singh*, on a question of law that carries with it enormous significance for the future of affirmative action and reservations under the Constitution. Can State governments make a sub-classification within the proportion prescribed to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in recruitment to public employment? In other words, by making a special allowance for certain groups that are more backward than others, are regional units encroaching on a domain that remains within Parliament's exclusive preserve?

Studies and data have shown that although they have been bracketed into two homogenous categories, as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), within the groups there are differing levels of development; and some castes are more discriminated against than others. In redressing this position, should State governments not be afforded the power to recognise intra-group variances? The judgment in *Davinder Singh* will seek to answer this. And, in doing so, it might well serve to provide much needed clarity to an area of law that has long required mending.

A circular in Punjab in 1975

The issues at stake in the case emanate out of a circular notified by the Government of Punjab in 1975. The circular stipulated that out of the total seats reserved for SCs in the State, 50% of the vacancies would be offered to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs. The other half would be open to all the remaining groups within the SC category. In July 2006, the Punjab and Haryana High Court struck down this notification, following a judgment of the Supreme Court, in 2004 in *E.V. Chinnaiiah vs State of Andhra Pradesh*.

In *Chinnaiiah*, a five-judge Bench quashed the Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Castes (Rationalisation of Reservations) Act, 2000, on the ground that it offended Article 341 of the Constitution. This provision allows the President of India to notify a list of SCs for each State, and stipulates that the list can only be modified by Parliament.

The Andhra Pradesh law sought to carve four distinct categories out of the President's list and granted to each category a separate quota based on its *inter se* backwardness. The Court found that the State government had no power to tinker with the list because it was clear on a bare reading of Article 341 that such authority vested only with Parliament. The judgment also pointed to B.R. Ambedkar's speech in defence of the presidential list, in which he had warned that if



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The case of 'State of Punjab vs Davinder Singh' highlights the point that within SCs and STs, there are differing levels of development, with some castes more discriminated against than others

State governments were allowed to amend the list, we ran the risk of the exercise partaking purely political considerations.

Even though its 1975 circular was struck down, the Government of Punjab remained persistent. It enacted a new law, i.e., the Punjab Scheduled Castes and Backward Classes (Reservation in Services) Act, 2006, which once again provided first preference to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs. The High Court declared this law too to be unconstitutional. But in August 2020, sitting on appeal over the decision, the Supreme Court doubted the correctness of its earlier verdict in *Chinnaiiah*, prompting the creation of a seven-judge Bench and a fresh hearing on the issues raised.

In questioning the extant view, the Supreme Court cited its judgment in *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India*, which arose out of the Mandal Commission's report. There, a nine-judge Bench had held that sub-classifications within socially and educationally backward classes (OBCs) for services under the government was permissible. The majority endorsed Justice Chinnappa Reddy's judgment in *K.C. Vasanth Kumar & Another vs State Of Karnataka* (1985). In it, he had ruled that while the propriety of making sub-classifications might depend on the facts of each case, "we do not see why on principle there cannot be a classification into backward classes and more backward classes, if both classes are not merely a little behind, but far far behind the most advanced classes. In fact such a classification would be necessary to help the more backward classes; otherwise those of the backward classes who might be a little more advanced than the more backward classes might walk away with all the seats, just as, if reservation was confined to the more backward classes and no reservation was made to the slightly more advanced backward classes, the most advanced classes would walk away with all the seats available for the general category leaving none for the backward classes."

Equality and castes

Beyond this, at the root of the matter is the Constitution's collective commitment to equality. Contained in Articles 14 to 16, which can be read together as a code, is a promise of substantive equality. This guarantee recognises that individuals, throughout India's history, have been discriminated against based on their caste. Therefore, our constitutional vision demands that we be mindful of group interests in striving to ensure equal treatment. Under this model, reservations must be seen not as a measure in conflict with – and in exception to – the basic notion of equality, but, instead, as a means to

furthering and entrenching that goal.

Indeed, since its judgment in *State Of Kerala & Anr vs N.M. Thomas & Ors* (1975), the Supreme Court has, at least in theory, appeared to acknowledge that governments not only possess the power to make reservations – and correct historical wrongs – but also have a positive duty to ensure substantive equality. Viewed thus, if the Government of Punjab were to find on the basis of its studies – and it certainly has in this case – that its existing measures of reservation have not adequately reached Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs, then it is constitutionally obligated to ensure that these measures are corrected.

If Article 341 is seen as constituting a bar against sub-classification, then that prohibition would run athwart the Constitution's equality code. In any case, even on a plain reading, Article 341 does not impose such a prohibition. It merely proscribes State governments from including or excluding castes from the President's list of SCs. Where States provide special measures to certain castes that are within this list, they do not act to include or exclude other castes from the list. Those castes will continue to be entitled to the State's general provisions of reservation.

On sub-classification

In the case of the Punjab law, it decidedly does not modify the President's list. It merely accounts for *inter se* backwardness within that list by providing for a greater degree of preference to Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs. This sub-classification is also in keeping with the Constitution's time-honoured theory that reasonable classifications are permissible to ensure that equality is achieved.

Once we see the list of SCs and STs not as homogenous categories, but as comprising different castes with differing levels of development, a sub-classification will have to be judged on its own merits. That is, the Court will only have to examine whether Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs are intelligibly differentiable from other castes within the President's list, and whether the grant of preferential treatment to them – and the extent of such grant – bears a rational nexus with the law's larger objective of ensuring fair treatment.

It is time the Supreme Court takes seriously what it recognised in *N.M. Thomas* – that governments have both a power to make reservations and a duty to ensure that the constitutional dream of equality is achieved. To that end, any authority vested in the States to provide for special measures to those castes within SCs and STs who are most discriminated against must be seen as a way of making real the idea of equal opportunity.

A new sense of urbanisation that is dominating

There have been two events in the media glare in the last nine months in India, namely, the inauguration of two very important institutions, i.e., the new Parliament building, which is a political institution, and the Ram temple, a religious institution, which raise pertinent issues. Both of these were inaugurated by the Prime Minister of India. Does this mean that the elected representative of the people can comfortably take over both the roles of democracy and worship? Will our future cities be driven by religion as the core, and not work, industry, and modernism, which have been an essential feature of the last seven decades of urbanisation?

It is estimated that around ₹85,000 crore will be spent in infrastructure building in Ayodhya. Will religious cities be the new paradigm of urban development in India?

Colonial versus new cities

The cities and urban development in the last two centuries draw a rural to urban migration premise for sustaining industrialisation. Metros are colonial cities according to the current discourse and new cities such as Ayodhya, Kashi and Pushkar must be built. The colonial cities were meant for the transport of goods, taxation and then sending them by ship.

Cities also bring in elements of modernism, not just in architecture but also in the entire gamut of culture, literature, human behaviours and the like. There are anecdotes of how this modernist feature was embedded in the development model of the Indian city. Innovative design and modernist features brought in by Le Corbusier, and the influence of Habib Rahman, who was brought in by Jawaharlal Nehru to design some of the important buildings in the national capital, laid an emphasis on modern technology and mass production techniques and material to design and manufacture high quality and cheap goods that are accessible to many.



Tikender Singh Panwar

is former Deputy Mayor, Shimla, and Member, Kerala Urban Commission

The old understanding that cities are considered to be centres of enlightenment, workplace, and habitat is being challenged, also bringing into focus the role of the state

Likewise, almost all modern towns were developed with spaces for theatre, culture, art, and recreation. This was primarily the driving feature in modern cities.

The building of new towns met several needs – from providing jobs and homes for refugees and absorbing excess population from the older urban areas, to generating economic development in the local region and serving as symbols of the new modern India that was emerging, though not completely ideal and commensurate to the needs, but quite inclusive in design and what was built.

In the current phase, a new sense of urbanisation is dominating. And the old understanding that cities are considered to be centres of enlightenment, workplace, and habitat is being challenged. Cities should not just be centres of workplaces but also centres of *yatras*, pilgrimage and so on. Thus, we find big corporates also landing in a small town such as Ayodhya and investing heavily in its infrastructure. Thus, the new conundrum in India is for a new form of urbanisation; a new revivalism of the faith where the cities and towns and where the system should be aligned to the religion of the majority, and not separate from it.

Investments and random modules

The post-colonial period saw the emergence of new towns, and some of them were industrial as well such as Bhilai, Rourkela, and Chandigarh to name a few. Still, the metros attracted the largest numbers of people and investments.

We know from the ranking of urban centres that if one goes by metro classification of the highest in population and wealth generation, colonial cities emerge in the list. After that the other urban centres are regional in character. There is an effort to try and elevate a regional pilgrimage city to that of a colonial city – the heavy investment in the urban infrastructure of

Ayodhya is a pointer. It is good to spend resources in any regional city be it for production or tourism or otherwise. However, since there is no apparent plan to direct such expenditure according to a justifiable plan of investment in regional cities across India, one wonders what the justification of spending on random modules in a haphazard way is. The new Central Vista. The Sardar Patel statue. The high-speed bullet train project between Ahmedabad and Mumbai. The temple in Ayodhya. What do we understand from this enormous expenditure?

It seems to indicate that the goal of the Indian government is to be a modern nation sitting on an ancient seat and to try to reverse the separation of religion from politics – to signal religion to be a social phenomenon rather than a private one.

The role of the state and social good

This draws one's attention to one of the moot points. And that is to understand what the role of the state is in building cities and creating investments. We know that the accumulation of capital and the generation of surplus in a democratic society should be directed towards social good, and not for religious good, as we have experienced in the early centuries of Hindu revivalism. What does social good mean? In simple terms it means that the surplus generated must be distributed to build modern institutions, education, health, social infrastructure, particularly in a society that screams for social sector investments (the World Bank estimates that India will need to invest \$840 billion over the next 15 years for urban infrastructure), and not for religious good, which is exactly what we are doing now.

This revivalism is based on an acute form of centralisation of finances and a ghettoisation of urban spaces on a religious basis. An answer to this is decentralisation, democratisation and a more dynamic coexistence of citizens, with access to equal rights and obligation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CAA and timing

The decision of the Centre to notify the CAA rules that would enable the implementation of the CAA is an obvious act to deflect the nation's attention from the severity of the Supreme Court's order on the electoral bonds issue. It is also to provide the pliable electronic media with an alternate topic and to hold fiery media debates.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

Court verdict, corrections

The reports, on the judgment on the *Sanatana Dharma* case and on multiple corrections to the verdict (Tamil Nadu, March 8 and March 10), need comment. First, the 'advice' by the judge to lawmakers on the issue was marked by misinformation about the caste system, in particular, about the periodicity of its existence. It is well established that the caste or *varna* system has existed

in India spreading across millenniums. The judicial observation that the *varna* system was/is not based on birth but by avocation is misleading and arouses suspicion of the judge's support of the same. Second, it is shocking and outrageous that the verdict has been corrected multiple times after its official publication on the website. This gives an indication that the judge was not sure of what she had to say and

became apprehensive of possible opposition to her own views from learned quarters. One expects high professionalism in the judicial process. Moreover, it is the judiciary's requirement that a judge examines a case on the basis of it being in line with the Constitution and other established laws. The top court of the land should intervene in this issue of corrections. It needs to take

action before this becomes a precedent.
Clement Arockiasamy, Chennai

Judiciary, electoral bonds

The Supreme Court of India cracked the whip as far as the electoral bonds scheme is concerned and made the State Bank of India fall in line. At the same time, the Court could have also asked all political parties and the purchasers of the bonds to submit similar information

from their side. This would have not only expedited the matter but also helped to match the particulars received from the bank. Ultimately, the bank is only the facilitator of the scheme. The judiciary needs to be equally, if not more concerned, about the black money at the disposal of political parties during elections and the steps needed to cleanse elections.
S. Parthasarathy, Chennai

Khelo India: Perfect present, bright future

We recently concluded the Khelo India Games with resounding success. While the magnitude of the mission has grown exponentially, the government has been adding new facets to the Khelo India campaign in terms of both technical and demographic diversity. Change is constant and if results are any yardstick, we are on the right track.

The Khelo India mission has been the cornerstone of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a nation oozing with energy. India is a young country: 65% of the population is below 35 years. Sports is arguably the ideal glue to bring everyone together.

Sports now provides a serious career option to our youth. We understand that every athlete has a career span. While achieving excellence is their primary goal, we as the government must reciprocate. Khelo India medal winners, who can potentially go on to win laurels for the country, deserve a tension-free existence. In a recent notification, the government has decided to provide jobs to those who meet the necessary criteria.

A few firsts

In this cycle of the Khelo India Games, we had a few firsts. Primarily aimed at spreading the good word on sports and boosting capacity-building in all the States to stage sporting events of importance, the Youth Games were held in the south for the first time. Tamil Nadu's multi-city approach was a success with fans having free and easy access to venues. Similarly, for the first time, the University Games were staged across seven north-eastern States, with Assam hosting 16 different sports. The Northeast has given India some of its top boxers and hockey and football players. It was in the fitness of things that Mizoram hosted men's football and Sikkim, boxing. The government is not only promoting Olympic disciplines, but also



Anurag Singh Thakur

is Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports and Information and Broadcasting, Government of India

Identifying and nurturing talent is a challenging task and one that drives the Khelo India movement

giving adequate attention to indigenous sports like Yogasana, Ghatka, Mallakhamba, Silambam and Kalaripayattu. The participation in these sports has been overwhelming.

It's been the government's endeavour to offer every State the opportunity to stage a major sports event. Enabling Ladakh to stage a portion of the Khelo India Winter Games for the first time in February is a case in point. It was heartening to see Ladakh excel in ice hockey and ice skating, alongside the Army and the Indo Tibetan Border Police teams. The confidence in hosting a national event of importance will only make the States and UTs.

The Khelo India mission has been a solid learning process. At the heart of this mission are the athletes, coaches, and other support staff. Athletes selected to represent India in international competitions must only focus on their goals and nothing else.

It is incumbent upon us to provide the right environment and ecosystem to make the athletes shine. Sports administration is all about setting transparent and stringent processes and executing them with some flexibility. It is important to produce a system which promotes ease of living and does not give anxiety to athletes. The government continues to yearn for that perfect system.

Sports always works on a cause-and-effect basis. The consistent international success of sportspersons in the Khelo India ecosystem is a testament to the government's success in sticking to the right causes. For example, the creation and upgradation of sports infrastructure was a priority. More than 300 sports infrastructure projects have been approved in 34 States/UT at a cost of more than ₹3,000 crore.

Identifying talent and nurturing them is a challenging task and one that drives the Khelo India movement. For the selection of genuine talent, the government has a two-tier structure consisting of a Scouting Committee and a

Developmental Panel for training. At present, close to 2,800 athletes in 21 sports disciplines (including para sports) have been chosen as Khelo India athletes after being selected from various national championships, open selection trials, assessment camps, and from the Khelo India Games.

Glorious moments

The Khelo India mission has contributed significantly to India's glorious moments in international events including the Olympics, World Championships, Asian Games, and Commonwealth Games. Since 2018, both the participation of Khelo India athletes and their returns from global events have shown an upward trajectory. In 2022, 495 Khelo India athletes won 312 medals, with close to 63% of athletes returning with a medal. In 2018, 92 athletes won 82 medals.

Several sportspersons have taken up coaching as a career. Our system boasts of top coaches who keep producing results. In December 2022, many of them were promoted to high-performance coaches in the Sports Authority of India training centres and the National Centres of Excellence.

In keeping with the Olympic charter, we have given equal impetus to women. The ratio of men versus women athletes in the four Khelo India Games this season was almost 50:50. The Asmita Khelo India Women's League features 17 disciplines. It has been a great success. More than 63,000 women athletes have participated in more than 520 competitions in 21 sports disciplines. We aim to support the National Sports Federations and the State governments to conduct Khelo India Women's League tournaments for many age groups.

Development is always a work in progress. In about seven years, the government has been able to spread the Khelo India footprint. It's in the heart and soul of every Indian who wants to dream big in sports. And we have only begun.

The BJP's near-complete domination

The party's march to make Gujarat Opposition-free continues

STATE OF PLAY

Mahesh Langa
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In December 2022, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stormed to power in Gujarat by winning a record 156 out of 182 seats and a vote share of 52.5%, there was a general sense that there was no need for it to induct leaders from the Opposition. After all, its domination in the State was nearly complete.

However, that was not the case. Nearly a year after the Assembly polls, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLA Bhupendra Bhayani became the first legislator to resign from the House. A week later, Congress MLA Chirag Patel also resigned from the Assembly. In January 2024, four-time Congress MLA C.J. Chavda followed suit. And in March, Arjun Modhwadia, a former president of the Gujarat Congress and a former Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, and Arvind Ladani, a first-time MLA from the Congress, also resigned and moved to the BJP.

All the four legislators cited the Congress leadership and the party's "lack of direction" as the reasons for their move. Mr. Modhwadia stated in his resignation letter that the Congress's decision to "decline the invitation of Lord Ram's temple consecration on Ayodhya" pushed him to sever ties with the party, which, he said, had become "like an NGO".

Sometime in the middle of these exits, former Union Minister and Rajya Sabha member from the Congress, Naran Rathwa, too quit the beleaguered party and joined the BJP. So did an independent MLA, Dharmendrasinh Vaghela, who had earlier left the BJP when he was not given a ticket

to contest elections in 2022.

There is now a buzz in the corridors of power in Gandhinagar that the total number of Opposition MLAs in the Gujarat Assembly will be in single digits before the Lok Sabha elections. As of today, the Congress, which had 17 MLAs, is left with 13, and the AAP, which had five, now has four.

Nearly everyday, former legislators or panchayat leaders or leaders associated with cooperatives are inducted into the ruling party. This gives sense that it is impossible for any leader to survive in the political sphere or in public life if they are not with the BJP.

Since 2007, more than 100 leaders from the Congress, including dozens of legislators and parliamentarians, have jumped ship and are today ministers, MPs, or MLAs. Since 2017, the pace at which Congress leaders have been moving to the BJP has accelerated.

Ministers in Gujarat including Balvantsinh Rajput, Raghavji Patel, and Kunwarji Bavaliya; Union Minister Devusinh Chauhan; Rajya Sabha MP Narhari Amin; and several others such as Hardik Patel, who was at the forefront of the Patidar quota agitation, and Alpesh Thakor, the face of the Other Backward Classes, were brought in from the Congress.

For the BJP, the idea of an Opposition-mukt (free) Gujarat means that those who cannot be defeated electorally must be co-opted into the party either with incentives or

through coercion or a mix of both. "Nobody joins the ruling party out of love," said a Congress leader who joined the BJP a few years ago. "There are various factors prompting these moves and they vary from person to person. However, the underlying factor is that in Gujarat, most politicians have businesses or business interests. And to protect them, they make these decisions or cut deals. Managing a business is impossible if you are not on the right side of the regime nowadays."

However, it is equally true that many leaders in the Congress are frustrated with the lack of leadership and direction from the party high command. "There has been no communication from the high command with the State leaders for many years," a Congress legislator complained.

For the BJP, inducting leaders from the Opposition has only helped it further strengthen and expand its already massive base across the State. The party has won seven consecutive Assembly polls since 1995. Today, the BJP rules all the eight municipal corporations; the majority of the municipalities, and district and taluka panchayats; and all the cooperative institutions in Gujarat. Its vote share in the State in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was a staggering 63%; it won all the 26 seats.

However, the BJP would do well to focus on strengthening governance, improving socio-economic indicators such as nutrition and educational standards, and filling up vacancies in public health centres and hospitals. For that to happen, the party high command must empower the local leadership to work instead of looking for direction from New Delhi for every governance decision.

Number of poor people increase in Sub-Saharan Africa

The World Bank cites conflict-induced instability in the region as the reason behind rising poverty numbers

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

At a time when the number of people living in poverty has been declining worldwide, and significantly in some regions, Sub-Saharan Africa has seen a high increase. In 1990, 278 million people were identified as poor in Sub-Saharan Africa. This number increased to 397 million in 2019. The increase was particularly profound in the last decades, from 2008 onwards, when conflicts occurred in many countries in this region. These statistics were compiled by the World Bank.

This is in contrast to other regions. In South Asia, for instance, 1.62 billion people were identified as poor in 1990. This number came down to 221 million in 2019. In fact, in 1990, 80% of the world's poor were living in South Asia, while only 13.8% were in Sub-Saharan Africa. In 2019, though, the share in South Asia fell to 31.4% while that of Sub-Saharan Africa increased to 56.6%. The overall estimated numbers of poor people, the world over, fell from 2.01 billion in 1990 to 702 million. **Chart 1** shows the number of people living below the poverty line of \$2.15/day (2017 PPP).

While the number of poor people in Sub-Saharan Africa increased, poverty in terms of the share of the region's population reduced from 53.8% in 1990 to 35.4% in 2019 (**Chart 2**). The corresponding number for South Asia fell from 49.8% to 10.5%, a drastic decline that is offset slightly by the fact that the share increased marginally from 10.4% in 2018 to 10.5% in 2019.

In West Asia and North Africa, poverty levels which were steadily declining from 1990 took a turn for the worse in 2014 and steadily increased from then to reach 9.6% in 2018, higher than 6.3% in 1990. This increase coincided with the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Iraq,

and the conflicts in Yemen. Besides, states have been fragile in this region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

The World Bank also infers that poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected states (FCS). These include Madagascar, Burundi, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Malawi, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo, and Zambia. In fact, the only country outside Sub-Saharan Africa included as an FCS that registered a poverty rate above 60% was Syria. Yemen was a close second with 58%. The World Bank also mentions that African countries that managed to avoid fragility, such as Benin, Cape Verde, Gabon, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, and Senegal, also managed to steadily reduce poverty.

Chart 3 shows the countries with their latest estimated poverty rate, according to World Bank Data, in FCS, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the rest of the world. South Sudan and Burundi, with a poverty rate of over 70%, had the highest poverty rate globally. In at least eight Sub-Saharan countries, the poverty rate was over 60%. Among countries in the rest of the world, which are not in the list of FCS, Uzbekistan leads the list with a poverty rate of 28% followed by Belize (18%), Djibouti (17%), Honduras (12%), and Suriname (11%).

In total, the 43 countries which had the highest poverty rates in 2019 were either in the FCS list or were in Sub-Saharan Africa, which, according to the World Bank, points to the importance of stability. Instability and conflict increased debt distress in these nations. "Economic growth is premised on stability, and the fact that China and India were stable for the past 30 years is easily taken for granted," the World Bank blog observed. Both these countries have dominated global poverty reduction due to strong economic growth in recent decades.

In the grip of poverty

The charts were sourced from the World Bank's data blog titled "Accelerating Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa Requires Stability" authored by Johannes Hoozeven, Johan A. Mistiaen and Haoyu Wu. Additional data was accessed from the World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform



Chart 1: The chart shows the number of poor people below the \$2.15/day line (2017 PPP)

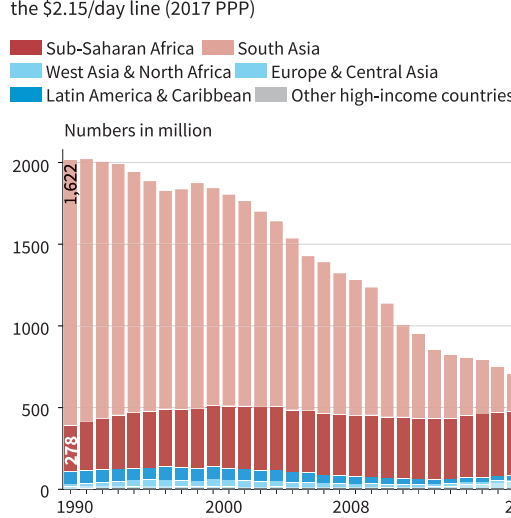


Chart 2: The chart shows poverty in terms of percentage of population. Poverty in terms of the percentage of population reduced from 53.8% in 1990 to 35.4% in 2019 in Sub-Saharan Africa. The corresponding number for South Asia fell from 49.8% to 10.5%

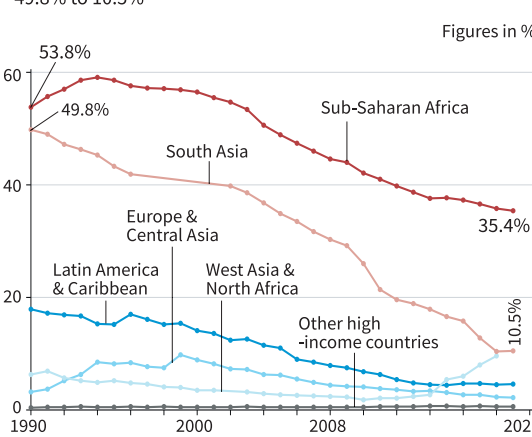
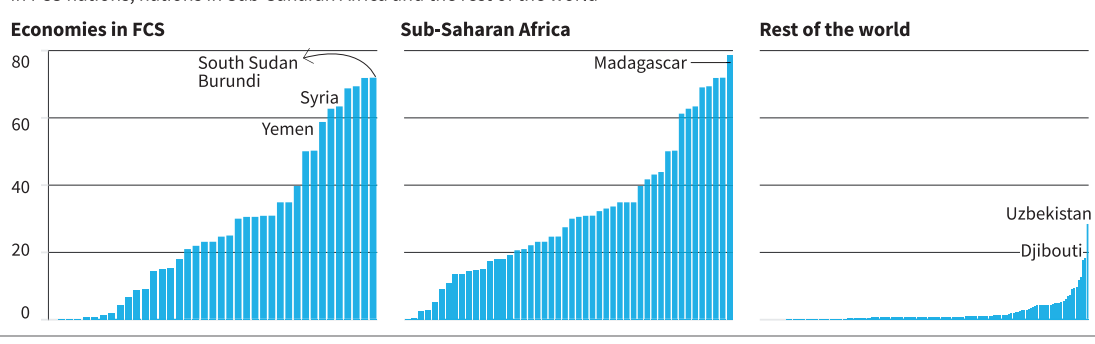


Chart 3: Countries with their latest estimated poverty rate (as a % of population), according to World Bank Data, in FCS nations, nations in Sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 13, 1974

Brain operation under acupuncture done in Madras

Madras, March 12: For the first time, brain operation was successfully performed on a patient yesterday at the Government Stanley Hospital here under "acupuncture anaesthesia."

According to Dr. P. Narendran, Professor of Neuro-Surgery at the Hospital, who did the operation, this was the first time in India that the brain was operated with acupuncture anaesthesia instead of the general anaesthesia.

The patient, a 30-year-old labourer, was referred from the Calicut Medical College Hospital to the Stanley Hospital three weeks ago. He complained of vomiting, severe headache and deterioration in vision because of intra-cranial pressure.

Explaining "acupuncture anaesthesia," Dr. Narendran said hairlike needles were punctured not into the muscle but under the skin at various 'meridian points' of the body. The needles could be operated either by hand or by low voltage current. In this case, electric acupuncture was used by putting 26 needles in the webs of the toes, feet and in the scalp at various 'meridian points'. The patient developed 'analgesia' (abolition of pain sensation) on the scalp where the operation was done.

Dr. Narendran said the patient was conscious throughout the surgery and was talking to the doctor. During the entire 90-minute operation, the acupuncture was continued. There was no appreciable alteration in the patient's pulse and respiration in the course of the operation. But there was a slight rise in the blood pressure for a few minutes in the initial stages and later it came to normal. He did not feel even a little pain and walked up to his ward after the operation. It could also be done on animals like race horses for improving their efficiency.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 13, 1924

Standing Committees for India

London, March 11: The Lords to-day adopted without discussion a motion expressing the desirability of appointing a Standing Joint Committee on Indian affairs of both houses to examine and report on any bill or matter referred to them especially by either house and consider, with a view to reporting if necessary, thereon any matter relating to Indian affairs brought to the notice of the Committee by the Secretary of State from India.

CONTRAPUNTO

If you ever injected truth into politics, you have no politics

-WILL ROGERS

New Face, Same Game

BJP moves in Haryana again showcased its ability to quickly manage trouble. Will it pay off in polls?

In a day marked by fast moving developments, BJP in Haryana dumped its erstwhile coalition partner and changed its CM about seven months before the assembly's term is scheduled to end.

Different strokes, different elections | BJP emerged the dominant party in Haryana in 2014. However, voting patterns between LS and assembly elections were distinct in 2019.

Jat factor | Jats are politically the state's most significant group. The most striking aspect of BJP's social engineering in Haryana is its influence over all non-Jat groups.

Impact on LS | By moving Khattar out without disturbing the underlying social coalition, BJP may have offset some of the unhappiness against the state government.

Big picture | Both BJP and Congress have been confronted by rocky state governments. But the big difference is that the former is able to replace state leaders without a government imploding.

Photos & Power

Everyone on Insta manipulates their images. But it's different when those in positions of public trust do so

This is an era of the 'Instagram face'. Teens to greybeards, who isn't using filters on social media? So much so, real-life encounters with yesteryear buddies are often shocking.

Diamond cut | UK's royal family lives off UK taxpayers. In exchange, it has to deliver an overall fairytale-ness. A lot of this is playacting, and British public seems to accept it.

Common carat | When people in powerful positions push doctored photos, that's a completely different ball game from your neighbour erasing his acne from his profile pic.

Dictator grade | Such deception also has very scary antecedents. Dictators managed to pull it off even before Photoshop was created.

Crown jewel | Proving an image is fake can be hard. But proving that it isn't can be harder. Public figures who play fast and loose with authenticity, risk losing credibility.

Comma sense

A humble punctuation mark can make a world of difference in meaning when we write

Jug Suraiya

Comma was being tried in the Court of Grammar and Punctuation. The interrogators included Full Stop, Question Mark, Exclamation Point, Apostrophe, Hyphen, and Dash.

You are really no use whatsoever. Full Stop said with a full stop. Why should you exist at all? asked Question Mark with a question mark.

You have a point—all of you—said Dash with a dash. Semicolon wouldn't say anything as it was sulking, having been given a mere semi status, and Colon was too busy figuring out how not to get itself mixed up with a part of the human anatomy.

Hyphen chipped in, pointing out that a man-eating tiger was a very different proposition from a man eating tiger.

Hang on, gyan, give me a chance to make my case, pleaded Comma. Take the sentence, Let's study Rahul. It implies that Rahul is a subject of study, like algebra or history.

Here's another example, continued Comma. I passed my exams with help from my parents, the Math teacher and the Education Minister. That makes it sound as though the Math teacher and the Education Minister are the parents of the writer.

Now see what happens when I add myself a second time to the sentence, I passed my exams with help from my parents, the Math teacher, and the Education Minister. The second comma, after teacher, is called the Oxford comma, explained Comma, and it clarifies that the Math teacher and the Education Minister are not the writer's parents.

I rest my case, concluded Comma. Court case dismissed! exclaimed Exclamation Point. And Comma lived happily ever after. Or lived, happily, ever after.

Karnataka Political Scorchers

Taps are dry, as is the treasury. Congress is thirsty to take on an upbeat BJP. BJP's banking on BSY's putramoh to galvanise saffron campaign. Will Kannadigas stick to the tradition of giving more LS seats to state's opposition party?

Asha Rai@timesgroup.com



Temperatures are soaring in Karnataka, literally and figuratively. Several districts are reeling under an acute drinking water shortage—in Bengaluru 1,214 borewells have completely dried up.

Federalism in DNA | Kannadigas must be the country's truest federalists if their voting pattern over the last 25 years is any yardstick. By accident or design, they end up voting for different parties in state and general elections.

Between 1999 and 2024, only for about six years, did the state have the same party or alliance in the historic Vidhana Soudha, as in North Block.

In 1999, Congress won the assembly, but Lok Sabha elections saw Vajpayee-led NDA take over at the Centre, while SM Krishna took oath as CM. UPA's decade, 2004-2014, had a Dharam Singh as CM in Congress-JDS govt for just two years before an alliance of JDS-BJP ousted it.

When Modi swept to power in 2014, Siddaramaiah's Congress govt had been installed the previous summer. Only in Modi's second term did BJP end up governing the state for about four years under two different CMs.

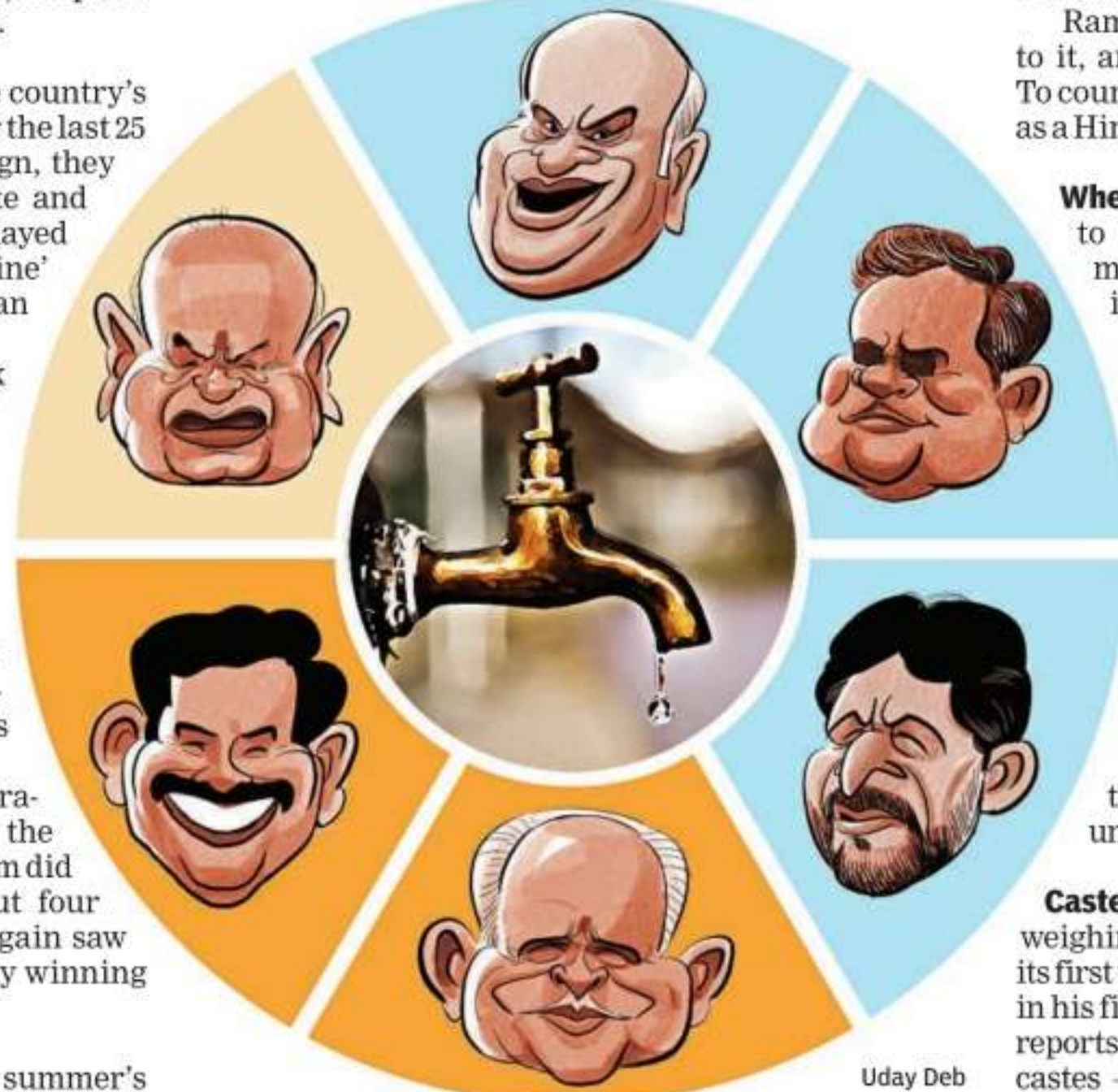
Decoding vox populi | That's what makes this summer's LS polls so enthralling in Karnataka. Will the country's fourth largest economy, with a capital city estimated to have the country's highest per capita income, vote for BJP and Modi in line with its historic voting pattern or change its stripes?

Does higher prosperity lead to more informed choices? Do economic issues resonate more than emotive ones? Will the idea of looming delimitation and with it a lower voice in national politics have a bearing on voting choices of Kannadigas?

Congress claims it'll win 20 of the state's 28 seats.

Given its current tally is a lone MP; that's a Himalayan task. BJP, which won 25 of 28 seats in 2019, is hoping for an encore. Ground reality for both parties lies somewhere in between.

Charge's home pitch | For Congress, it's very important it does well in Karnataka—the only big state in its kitty.



Uday Deb

BJP's already dubbed the state Congress's ATM. Also, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is from here. In terms of optics, it's important Karnataka delivers big for Congress.

Undoubtedly, Congress's 'Five Guarantees' brought it electoral gains last summer as assembly elections were held against backdrop of rising prices, allegations of rampant corruption in, and fatigue with, BJP that, in turn, seemed to want to move on from Yediyurappa, yet unable to do so.

BJP in battling form | In a year, the scenario for BJP is much changed. Yediyurappa's son Vijayendra has been made BJP state party chief, in a bid to ensure the father is vested in turbocharging his son's political career with a great LS performance and also keep the influential Lingayat vote bank with BJP.

JDS, wiped out in last assembly polls, remains relevant in Old Mysore, could add to BJP's campaign in alliance.

Ram Mandir inauguration, and outreach leading up to it, are also expected to pay off massively for BJP. To counter it, Congress has been at pains to paint itself as a Hindu-friendly party too.

Where's the money? | Congress, meanwhile, appears to have realised guarantees alone might not do magic again, though it is putting an extra ₹55k cr in the hands of one crore families annually. The sops (free bus ride for women, free power up to a threshold, ₹2k per month for eligible women, free grain and stipends to unemployed) are costing upwards of ₹50k cr annually.

Hence, Congress has tried to play up alleged injustice in fund allocation by Centre; that it is not getting its fair share given the taxes collected from the state.

However, emotive issues work better with voters than economic ones. Congress hopes sops targeting women (who are genuinely thrilled with their free rides and ₹2k monthly in their bank accounts) will help it cross the crucial double-digit mark.

Caste census hot potato | Also, Congress seems to be weighing the option of releasing the caste census. In fact, its first version had been commissioned by Siddaramaiah in his first stint as CM. It was never made public. Leaked reports said it would show the two politically dominant castes—Lingayats and Vokkaligas or Gowdas—to be smaller in numbers than they actually claim to be.

The new one was accepted by CM late Feb but releasing it would open a Pandora's Box. It would lead to demands from under-represented OBC communities for higher reservation, in education and govt jobs, and higher grants to their communities through various welfare measures.

One needs to wait and see if Congress is willing to take the gamble of making it public. During 2018 assembly elections, gambit of offering Lingayats a separate religion status boomeranged on the party.

Why CAA's Just A Dash Of Spice In Bengal's Jhaal Muri

Mamata's personality carries her party, her bitter rivalry with state Congress sank INDIA, while CAA alone can't help BJP. Here's what's playing out in Bengal, with 42 seats, LS's third largest chunk

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What explains Mamata's ditching INDIA on seat-sharing?

Congress was desperate for some arrangement with Trinamool as it wanted to retain the two seats it won in 2019: Baharampur and Malda (South). In both, margin of victory was narrower than sum of votes polled by Trinamool and BJP candidates.

Malda (South)'s win margin of 8k+ votes was especially low. Trinamool's help in these two seats would have almost sealed a Congress victory this time. But politics isn't only about ideology, policy. It's also about personalities. And it's here that things went wrong. Differences between CM and state Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury go back a long way.

Trinamool's decreasing votes-to-seat conversion is a factor of increasing bipolarity. Trinamool candidates faced multiple opposition candidates in many seats in 2014. Many contests were tripolar; BJP candidates drew a significant chunk of anti-Trinamool votes.

2019 was different. BJP became principal opposition. Many contests were effectively bipolar, face-offs between Trinamool and BJP candidates reduced Congress-Left Front to a minimal role in most seats. It explains Trinamool's apparent difficulty in converting votes to seats. Mamata remains Bengal's most popular politician.

If 40% votes won TMC 34 seats in 2014, it needed 43% votes to win 22 seats in 2019. Is TMC sweating? How popular are Mamata, Modi?

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Feel more, sense more, let your heart function. The intelligence of the heart creates poetry in your life, gives dance to your steps, makes your life a joy...a festivity, a laughter...It makes you capable of love, of sharing. That is true life.

Osho

And The Earth Lila Oscar Goes To...

Prashant Solomon

What if an actor won an Oscar only based on the character he portrays and not the quality of his acting? Won't that be unfair?

Our lives in this physical world are a lila, play, in the mind of Brahmn. As William Shakespeare says in As You Like It: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances." Some people are born into royalty, huge fortunes, fame, power and the like.

of delusion, has been put over our conscious minds so that we temporarily forget about our true identity as spiritual beings and focus on our human experience.

This experience need not be about status, power, money, or fame. We do not have to be a king, queen, president, business magnate, or superstar to win our Earth Lila Oscar.

Yes, we should try to improve our lives, financially, socially, but more essential is to focus on the journey and not the destination. Irrespective of our roles, we need to pay heed to the small, daily things we do or say, and practice compassion, empathy, and kindness in our interactions with our fellow beings. A kind word, a helpful deed, a warm smile

can have a ripple effect and increase the positive, spiritual vibes in our world.

Each one of us is an atman, soul, a small but significant part of Parmatman, Supreme Soul, Brahmn. And Brahmn is experiencing everything through us. Therefore, everything we say or do in life should be for and on behalf of Brahmn. And, as everyone is a part of Brahmn, what we do or say to others, it is being said and done to God.

Spiritual growth and the Earth Lila Oscar come when we are able to use every opportunity to further the positive vibrations of love and compassion in the universe. Because everything matters.

"As long as we confuse the myriad forms of the divine lila with reality, without perceiving the unity of Brahmn underlying all these forms, we

are under the spell of maya...In the Hindu view of nature, then, all forms are relative, fluid, and ever-changing maya, conjured up by the great magician of the divine play. The world of maya changes continuously, because the divine lila is a rhythmic, dynamic play," writes Fritjof Capra in The Tao of Physics.

When Krishn tells Arjun in the Gita to perform his duty and fight with the Kauravs, he reiterates how we are the indestructible and immortal atman. He describes how we come again and again to the Earth and other realms and must keep doing our karma without worrying about the fruit.

So, keep at it and perform the role well, because it is all a play in the mind of Brahmn. And like any great character from the movies, we too will face challenges, but that is the essence of a good story.



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

CAA rollout

Challenge for Centre to dispel fears

WEEKS after the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and the roll-out of the Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand, the BJP has ticked another important box in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls by announcing the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Over four years after the law was passed, the Centre has notified the rules to fast-track citizenship for undocumented non-Muslim migrants — Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians — who came to India from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan before December 31, 2014, fleeing persecution on religious grounds.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has asserted that the CAA will not take away anyone's citizenship, even as the Opposition and some religious groups are apprehensive that the enforcement of the law will intensify communal polarisation. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has declared that she would fiercely oppose the CAA if it turns out to be discriminatory against people living in India or curtails their existing citizenship rights. The Indian Union Muslim League (IUM) has approached the Supreme Court, seeking a stay on the implementation of the rules that are 'manifestly arbitrary and create an unfair advantage in favour of a class of persons on the grounds of religious identity'.

The passage of the Citizenship Amendment Bill by Parliament in December 2019 and the subsequent presidential assent had triggered protests in parts of the country. The law has been under fire for excluding Muslims from its ambit despite the fact that Muslim minority communities have faced persecution in India's neighbourhood. There are also fears that Muslim refugees will be singled out as 'illegal migrants' in India. The onus is on the Centre to convince various stakeholders, primarily in states such as West Bengal and Assam which share their borders with Bangladesh, that the law is not politically or electorally motivated but is aimed at weeding out infiltrators and streamlining the grant of citizenship.

Shakeup in Haryana

BJP looks to consolidate OBC votes

PURSuing its time-tested strategy of not letting any chief minister take his or her chair for granted, the BJP has effected a shakeup in Haryana, which will witness both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections this year. The ruling party has replaced Manohar Lal Khattar, the incumbent CM for over nine years, with OBC leader Nayab Singh Saini. This is an attempt to consolidate non-Jat votes in the state and buck anti-incumbency. In recent months, the party's outreach to the OBC community has been evident in its selection of Mohan Yadav as Madhya Pradesh CM, besides the bestowal of the Bharat Ratna on former Bihar CM and OBC icon Karpoori Thakur.

The BJP is hoping that its Uttarakhand-style rejig would reap dividends in Haryana. In March 2021, the party had replaced Trivendra Singh Rawat with Tirath Singh Rawat as the CM of the hill state; a few months later, Tirath had made way for Pushkar Singh Dhami. The experiment worked as the BJP won the 2022 Assembly elections. This method had borne fruit in Gujarat as well.

In Haryana, the party is now banking on a younger leadership to counter the challenge from the Congress, the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) and the Indian National Lok Dal. The changing of the guard has coincided with a split between the BJP and the JJP after the two parties failed to arrive at a consensus on seat-sharing for the Lok Sabha elections. The move of BJP MP Brijendra Singh to the Congress camp has also prompted the saffron party to revamp its state unit. Late last year, the BJP had managed to retain Madhya Pradesh despite anti-incumbency and infighting. It remains to be seen if the party high command and the state leadership would be able to do the same in Haryana.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MARCH 13, 1924

LABOUR AND INDIA

EVERY day, it tends to become increasingly clear that the Labour Government has, at any rate at present, no policy in regard to India, except the policy of its predecessors, which is exactly the policy of the Government of India. In reply to a question in the House of Commons by Mr George Lansbury, the Under Secretary of State for India Robert Richards said that the attitude of the government on the subject of a round-table conference had already been indicated by the speeches of Sir Malcolm Hailey, that the Government of India was initiating an inquiry on the lines indicated in those speeches, and that it was continuing to seek other avenues, whereby the present situation might be eased. What these avenues are the Under Secretary did not say. The statement, in fact, was as indefinite as it could possibly be, and the fact that speaking nearly a week after the Secretary of State made his famous statement in the Lords, the Under Secretary was not able in any particular way to improve upon it shows the leisurely way in which the British Government is proceeding in this vitally important matter in spite of all the pressure of Indian opinion. But the indefiniteness of the remark seems to be nothing better than a camouflaging. In reality, these so-called 'other avenues' can mean nothing substantial. In reply to a question by Sir Henry Craik enquiring whether the Government intended to adhere to the provisions of the Act of 1919 for deferring the revision of the Constitution for a decade, Richards said, "That is exactly the position." If that is so, why trouble to seek these avenues which you can never find?

CAA and the majority-minority binary

Appeasement of its Hindu vote bank continues to be the BJP's key objective

PARSA VENKATESHWAR RAO JR
SENIOR JOURNALIST

AT the time of the Partition, those who moved across the freshly demarcated boundaries of India and Pakistan were deemed citizens of these countries. And the people who moved across later had to follow the rules framed under the Citizenship Act of 1955. In 2019, the Narendra Modi government brought in the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), specifying that members of persecuted religious minorities in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan would be granted citizenship in India. It is a curious law because it includes Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians along with Hindus, whereas the BJP's main aim is to appease its Hindu vote bank.

The government succeeded in its intent partly because Muslim groups launched protests, especially in Delhi. They felt that the law would in some way discriminate against Muslims who might want to migrate to India from these three countries. It was a fuzzy area. Home Minister Amit Shah gave the assurance on the floor of the Lok Sabha that Muslims who wanted to migrate from these countries would follow the regular migratory route and there would be no restrictions. It is the ulterior motive of the legislation to show that Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, all Muslim-majority countries, were targeting non-Muslim minorities. It has indeed been the case that the religious minorities in these



OMINOUS: There are apprehensions that the implementation of the CAA would worsen communal polarisation in states such as West Bengal and Assam. AN

countries have been in an uncomfortable position. After Independence, many Hindus continued to live in Pakistan. A problem arose with Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan only when the Taliban came to power in 1996.

It is ironic that the BJP and its ideological mentor, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), with their assertion of Hindu identity and their barely concealed anti-Muslim and anti-Christian rhetoric, should claim to stand up for persecuted religious minorities in the neighbourhood. This is a contradiction, but only in the eyes of the liberals. The BJP-RSS combine has never been apologetic about its brazenly Hindu majoritarian bias. Its diktat to Muslims and Christians in India is clear — follow Hindu culture and admit your Hindu ancestry. It is cultural bullying and that is the basic tenet of Hindutva that motivates the politics of the BJP and the RSS.

Again, facts would show up the falsity of the new law. How many members of religious minorities from these coun-

The religious minorities in the country are fighting with their backs to the wall, and they cannot be bothered about the asylum assurances to minorities from the neighbourhood.

tries have sought Indian citizenship under the new law? The numbers would be embarrassingly low. There would be few Jains and Parsis. The Buddhists would be Chakmas from Bangladesh, but the northeast states are not willing to accept such refugees, and there is a shameful silence on

the part of the Indian government about the issue.

As per the annual report (2021-22) of the Ministry of Home Affairs, 1,414 people from non-Muslim minority communities of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan were granted Indian citizenship, through registration or naturalisation, under the Citizenship Act between April 1 and December 31, 2021.

The Hindus who had migrated from East Pakistan in the 1950s and early 1960s pose a challenge in the face of Assamese assertion of cultural identity. So, the CAA, even with its rules finally framed, will remain a dead letter for the most part.

Why did Shah choose to announce the framing of rules weeks before the Lok Sabha elections? The CAA had been in limbo, and the Modi government did not want to be seen as passing a legislation and then ignoring it. Despite the government's claims that it has wrought an economic miracle in the country in the past 10 years, BJP leaders — especially Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Shah — feel the need to emphasise in as many ways as possi-

ble, direct or indirect, that they represent the Hindu interests in the country so as to bolster the party's electoral prospects. The BJP and the Modi-Shah duo are not content to rest on the ostensible achievements of governance. They have to demonstrate that the party is working for the Hindus.

Does it really matter to Hindus in the country if Hindus from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan are accommodated? The articulated Hindutva ideologues may talk as if it was an issue of life and death for the Hindu civilisation, but it remains rhetoric and nothing more. We have seen that in Tamil Nadu, people did not really like Sri Lankan Tamils staying in the state despite their sympathy for their ethnic brethren.

Muslims, too, are not as bothered now about the CAA as they seemed to be in late 2019 and early 2020 because they know that they are facing a greater challenge to their identity in their day-to-day lives. The BJP-RSS workers on the ground, especially in party-ruled states, are on the prowl, threatening Muslims in villages, towns and cities. And at the constituency level, the thrust of the BJP's campaign in local, state and national elections is on speaking against Muslims and Christians. The religious minorities in the country are fighting with their backs to the wall, and they cannot be bothered about the asylum assurances to the minorities from the neighbourhood.

The message behind the CAA rules is loud and clear: the BJP wants to reiterate that it is primarily a party of the Hindu majority in the country. This is a reassertion of its 'Hindu first' policy. The BJP cannot be blamed for using this bait. There is a need for Hindus to realise that it is naive of them to fear the minorities when the majority community is the domineering force.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What a country needs to do is be fair to all its citizens — whether people are of a different ethnicity or gender. — Chinua Achebe

Creatures pushed to the brink

SRIPRIYA SATISH

I was taking a stroll around my apartment complex when I spotted a monkey climbing swiftly across the windowsills. It was trying to open the windows of random apartments and was determined to lay its hands on food in any of them. I informed the security staff about the monkey and then forgot all about it. The next day, I saw a post in our community group on social media — it showed the picture of a messy kitchen with food items strewn all over the floor. The caption explained that a monkey had entered the kitchen when there was no one in the house and had caused havoc. Sympathy messages were pouring in and the resident had requested the community office to curb the monkey menace.

The incident reminded me of the leopard scare in a Bengaluru residential area a couple of months ago. The media splashed the news along with CCTV footage of the leopard taking a leisurely walk around the apartment premises. The society residents were warned to remain inside and not venture out alone under any circumstances. Ultimately, after nine days, forest officials captured the wild animal, providing a huge relief to the residents.

These episodes made me sit back and think. Be it monkeys or leopards, why would they roam about in places where people live? Have these animals entered our territory or have we encroached upon their habitat? All said and done, it's we who are the culprits. Are we not?

According to the *Living Planet Report 2020*, humans encroaching upon habitats poses a huge threat to biodiversity; humanity's increasing destruction of nature is having a catastrophic impact on wildlife populations. Nearly three billion birds have died in the past 50 years because of habitat loss in North America. In India, 12 per cent of the wild mammal species are threatened with extinction, including the Bengal tiger and the golden langur. Larger animals, particularly in freshwater habitats, are in greater danger of becoming extinct.

With the no-holds-barred construction of high-rise buildings, green spaces are shrinking to accommodate the burgeoning human population — it is wild animals that are paying the price. American animal rights activist Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson has said: 'Animals are like us, endangered species on an endangered planet, and we are the ones who are endangering them, it and ourselves. They are innocent sufferers in a hell of our own making.'

So, the next time we spot a monkey in our house or residential complex, should we consider it a menace or should we pity it? Food for thought!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Mamata putting self above nation

Apropos of the editorial 'TMC going solo'; buoyed by successive victories, the fiery TMC supremo, Mamata Banerjee, has become drunk on power. She must not forget how the Left ruled the state for decades but then melted away. If Mamata is keen on stopping the BJP juggernaut, she must put the nation and the Opposition alliance above herself and her party. As a prominent leader of the alliance, she could play a major role in strengthening the INDIA grouping and saving democracy. It is imperative that the Opposition bloc leaders stay united ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

BM SINGH, AMRITSAR

INDIA members must stay united

Refer to 'TMC going solo'; desperate to retain their hold over West Bengal, CM Mamata Banerjee and her party have failed to look at the bigger picture. The fact that the TMC has decided to go it alone in the state does not augur well for the INDIA bloc. Only the BJP will benefit from the splitting of Opposition votes. The presence of Mamata's party is limited to West Bengal, but INDIA has stakes in the entire country. Its constituents must not be rigid when it comes to the sharing of seats. The members of the Opposition bloc must fight the elections unitedly.

DEEPAK TAAK, PANCHKULA

Time for full disclosure

With reference to the news report 'Give poll bond info to EC by today, SBI told'; the Supreme Court is right to dismiss the State Bank of India's (SBI) plea seeking time till June 30 to disclose details of electoral bonds. By asking the SBI to submit the details to the Election Commission by the close of business hours on March 12, the apex court has dealt another blow to the ruling dispensation. The basis of the SBI's plea for extending the deadline to make the disclosures was frivolous and specious. It seemed like the bank was just trying to save the BJP's face ahead of the General Election.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, BY MAIL

Poll officer's departure

In a nation where the heart of democracy beats fervently, the abrupt resignation of

election commissioner Arun Goel reverberates like a thunderclap. As the expected announcement of the General Election looms, Goel's departure leaves a void filled with uncertainty. What was the reason behind his exit? Was it dissent, pressure or a silent protest against the erosion of institutional integrity? India, a country with around 98 crore registered voters, now stands on a precipice. Goel's resignation has cast a shadow over our electoral bedrock. There is a need for greater transparency in matters related to the institution.

GURPREET KAUR, MOHALI

Look out for China's spy ships

Refer to the news report 'Another Chinese spy in India's backyard'; the sighting of yet another Chinese research vessel near India's coast is a matter of grave concern for the country's security. The possibility of military intelligence-gathering in our backyard must prompt the government to take timely and proactive measures to ensure the protection of our maritime territory. Moreover, China's objection to PM Narendra Modi's recent visit to Arunachal Pradesh highlights the complex geopolitical dynamics at play in the region. In view of these challenges, it is imperative that India bolster its maritime surveillance and defence capabilities.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA

Change pattern of exam

With reference to the editorial 'Chit gangs of Nuh'; incidents of mass cheating in exams have long been prevalent in north India. This is the result of the pathetic state of education in the region, where successive governments have failed to address the issues plaguing the system. The poor infrastructure and a lack of facilities at schools are among the reasons for the decay in education. A change in the pattern of the exam is a must. The introduction of an open-book examination system would make it harder for students to use unfair means. Further, an open-book exam would test the candidates' ability to think critically, helping them learn and grow.

ANTHONY HENRIQUES, MUMBAI

China-assisted Left alliance resurges in Nepal



MAJ GEN ASHOK K MEHTA (RETD)
MILITARY COMMENTATOR

NEPAL'S unpredictable politics has turned into a game of musical chairs. Last week, a third coalition government was cobbled together, led by PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, after he became PM on December 25, 2022. It signified the resurgence of the Left alliance that was first minted with Chinese assistance as the short-lived Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in 2017. Symbolically, it represented the reunion of five Left Prime Ministers of Nepal — KP Oli, Prachanda, Baburam Bhattarai, Madhav Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal. Now, all but Bhattarai appear to be together. The Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu is jubilant. A Chinese Communist Party delegation arrived on Sunday to congratulate the government. Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), having 78 seats, is happy to return to power; the other parties include the CPN-Maoist (32), the CPN-Unified Socialist (10), the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (20) and the Janata Samajwadi Party (14). The

Loktantrik Samajwadi (four seats) and other smaller parties are bargaining the terms of joining the coalition.

A 22-member council of ministers, with four deputy prime ministers, has been installed, with the Maoists keeping the finance portfolio and RSP's Rabi Lamichhane returning as home minister. Should the other parties join the coalition, the Left alliance could have an unassailable majority. According to Nepal's new constitution, 165 seats are directly contested and 110 MPs come from proportional representation, ensuring that no single party can form the government. That's how Prachanda, as the leader of the third largest party, is the kingmaker and the 'lead PM' in a power-sharing arrangement that has become the staple for governance.

The Nepali Congress (NC), the single largest party with 89 seats, is furious with Prachanda's betrayal, though it is responsible for that. Suddenly, it has gone into political oblivion and will lose many of the 29 provincial ministers, four out of seven chief ministers and all 10 central ministers. The hara-kiri is caused by the endemic factionalism, a lack of vision and policy and an impatient and anxious younger leadership wanting to go it alone. In the 2022 elections, the pre-poll alliance with Maoists did not prove fruitful; the party has been critical of the Maoists



MUSICAL CHAIRS: Led by PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, a coalition government — the third after the 2022 elections — was cobbled together last week in Nepal. ANI

and lately undercut its interests in provinces and at the Centre. Prachanda declared that the alliance with the NC had not been rewarding and jumped ship to join hands with arch-enemy Oli, who, in turn, befriended near-enemy Madhav Nepal. The country's domestic politics embodies Lord Palmerston's adage: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual." The NC also attempted horse-trading and tried to stitch up a coalition. But, as before, it was late off the mark.

It is worth recalling the birth of the Left alliance in 2017; pictures of five former PMs were splashed on the front pages of newspapers. It

China has made no secret of its intent to recreate the Left alliance. Prachanda, though, has steered the ship deftly, balancing China with India.

was engineered by then Chinese Ambassador Yu Hong and Left leaders. Equally interesting is the fact that Indian agencies, which are perpetually accused of micro-managing and interference, were also stumped. What followed was three years of political instability as Oli did not honour the power-sharing arrangement with Prachanda.

China has made no secret of its intent to recreate the Left alliance. Prachanda, though, has steered the ship deftly, balancing China with India. Nepal has been unhappy with China over the Belt and Road Initiative, especially after Beijing failed to implement any of the projects signed

seven years ago. Since then, China has been working for the return of the NCP. Meanwhile, senior visiting Chinese leaders, including Vice-Minister Sun Haiyan of the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party, have noted that China and Nepal have very good relations, but some countries (alluding to India) are not happy about it. Earlier, Chinese Ambassador Chen Song had expressed similar sentiments, and Kathmandu's Foreign Office had issued a rare rebuke.

Many Nepalese are not happy with China, especially its 'wolf warrior' diplomacy and bullying over the 'One China' policy and Tibet policy. Corruption by Chinese companies in the construction of Pokhara International Airport and alleged Chinese encroachment along the northern borders led to protests last month in Kathmandu. Some Chinese nationals are accused in the gold smuggling case in Kathmandu. Chinese projects are white elephants, just like the Chinese-constructed Matala airport and Hambantota sea port in Sri Lanka, which were guaranteed to lead to a debt trap.

India is on the right track in Nepal, focusing on development, connectivity and hydel projects. India built a petroleum pipeline from Motihari in Bihar to

Amlekhgunj in Nepal. New Delhi provides gas and fuel to Nepal. The aberrations of the economic blockade of 2015 are fading and Indians are no longer the proverbial demons. The preliminary report on India's rail project to Kathmandu was submitted to Nepal two years ago; only the method of funding remains to be resolved as Kathmandu wants the Indian grant. The Chinese rail project from Kirung to Kathmandu has become a chimera, like the sundry trade and transit projects signed by the Oli government in 2016. India's great cooperation with Nepal is in the hydropower sector. Soon, Nepal will be self-sufficient in electricity and is already selling power to India. During Prachanda's visit to Delhi last June, it was agreed that Nepal will be able to sell up to 10,000 MW in the next 10 years. This will help reduce its trade deficit.

Prachanda has strived for Nepal to become a bridge between two major economies. It is early days for the new coalition; last year, Prachanda had joined the Nepali Congress-majority Democratic Alliance. There is no clarity on the new power-sharing arrangement between Prachanda and Oli. He can still do to Oli what the latter did to him in 2018. In the neighbourhood's great game, after the Maldives and Nepal, it is advantage China.

Not content with ruling Hindi belt, BJP looks to increase its footprint



RADHIKA RAMASESHAN
SENIOR JOURNALIST

A party that bagged 303 out of 543 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and appears to be in no immediate danger of losing its gains substantially would sit tight in the hope that the 2024 General Election is a done deal. But not the BJP.

The BJP will not live with the notion of geography circumscribing its unbridled ambition. It is acutely aware that most of its seats in 2014 and 2019 were drawn from the north and the west, with some significant payoffs for its persistence and combativeness from the east, but surely it must augment its numbers and footprint. It refuses to be labelled as a 'Hindi belt' party, which is tempting to many other parties, especially the Congress, for which decades of glory of ruling over the cow belt is the stuff of nostalgia.

In its impatience to transcend the boundaries etched by the north and the west, the saffron party has seriously tried to penetrate the east and the south in the prelude to

this year's battle. The east is a little more hospitable by virtue of the BJP's unassailable grip over Assam and stamping its imprint over West Bengal, which it seeks to enlarge. For the BJP, the battle to capture Bengal will not cease with the parliamentary polls. It has to unseat Mamata Banerjee and her party, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), in the 2026 Assembly polls if the sun must rise from the east for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Ideologically, West Bengal is too precious to be thrown away because the last vestiges of the Left's convictions must be wiped out for the Sangh.

Odisha has a different storyline for the BJP Chief Minister and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leader Naveen Patnaik was never antagonistic towards the BJP, except in 2008, when the aftermath of the Kandhamal communal violence — that resulted in the targeted assaults and killings of Christians, allegedly by the Vishva Hindu Parishad — forced him to break his alliance with the BJP. Even then, Patnaik cited the 'failure' to work out an amicable seat-sharing arrangement as the reason for the break-up and not the Sangh's divisive politics, ostensibly to keep a route open for future partnership.

The BJP, still short of a majority in the Upper House of Parliament, critically depended on the BJD as also other non-aligned regional



SHIFT: TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu (left) with BJP president JP Nadda. The southern party returned to the NDA fold recently. PTI

parties to bail it out in crunch situations. The BJD unflinchingly obliged the treasury benches. On the other hand, the BJP's Odisha leaders, who worked towards establishing the party as the principal Opposition after the Congress lay virtually comatose, grew restive each time the camaraderie between Patnaik and PM Narendra Modi was on display. The state's BJP leaders had to pull their punches just when they were getting ready to sock the BJD.

The past week was full of speculation over the BJD's return to the NDA, fuelled by reports of a meeting between Patnaik's political aide VK

The limited topographies of regional parties, which seldom extend beyond one or two states, have not thwarted their national aspirations.

Pandian and the BJP leadership over seat distribution. Like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha will vote simultaneously to elect MPs and MLAs. The bargain in the offing was that while the BJD would get a larger share of the Assembly seats, the BJP would contest more parliamentary ones. Latest reports suggest that the negotiations were hit by a pushback from the BJP's Odisha leaders, who publicly voiced their resentment with the BJD.

India's regional parties are a strange bunch. Their limited topographies, which seldom extend beyond one or two states, haven't thwarted their national aspirations and

ambitions that come into play before a parliamentary election, especially when their leaders sense that the Congress is too feeble to challenge the BJP independently.

Patnaik has no manifest national aspirations but, being an astute politician, he realised that the hostility of the BJP's state leaders disrupted harmony on the ground. The prospect of even having a working relationship was ruled out. As a rule, the BJP's central brass generally sidesteps its state units if it is determined to do business with a regional force and a friendly one like the BJD. Why did Odisha buck the norm? Possibly because the leaders sensed that a beginning to fill the Opposition space had to be initiated and now was the time, like in Bengal, where the BJP has effectively displaced the Congress-Left as the TMC's adversary.

In the south, the BJP's only significant breakthrough in acquiring an ally was in Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP). Following a six-year estrangement, which saw the TDP's rout by the then-fledgling YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), TDP chief N Chandrababu Naidu returned to the NDA in the belief that the anti-YSRCP votes must not be split, especially since the Congress has not revived there.

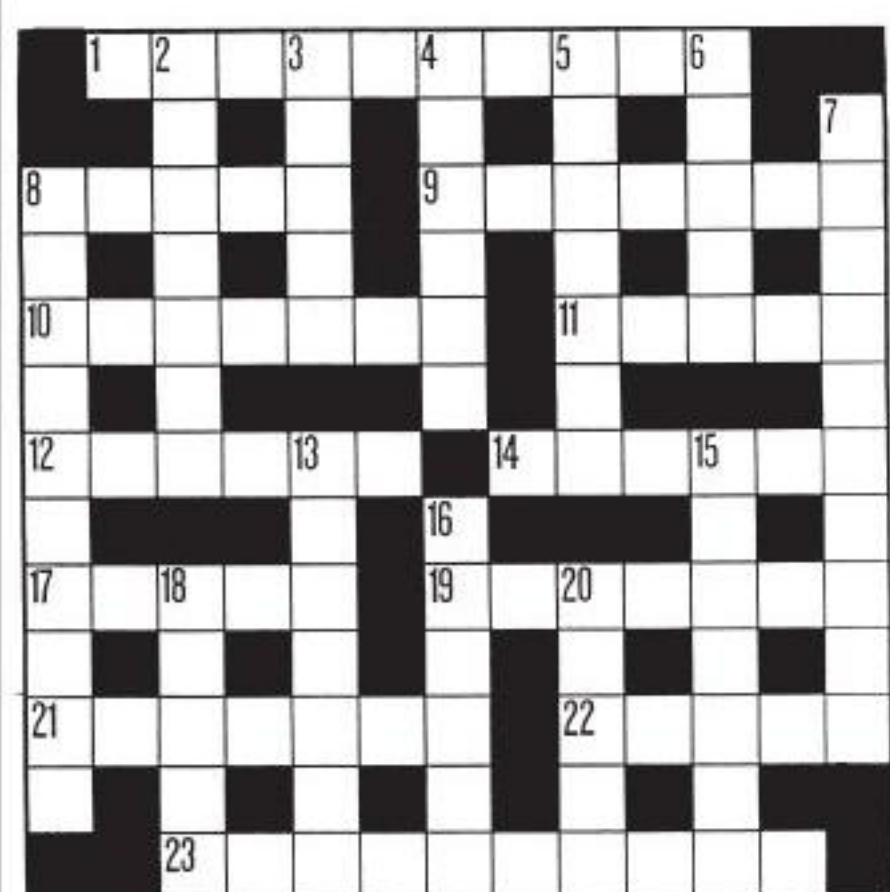
In direct contrast to Odisha, in Andhra, the BJP ignored the state unit's protestation

and went ahead, signing a pact clinched largely on the TDP's terms. The larger context was that the BJP needed to have a presence all over the south, and the TDP prop was good enough for a start.

In Tamil Nadu, the dominant AIADMK faction, helmed by Edappadi K Palaniswami, rebuffed the BJP's feelers for a partnership. On its own, the BJP, steered by Modi, made concerted efforts to woo the state, which is under the shadow of Dravida Kazhagam politics with an overt emphasis on anti-Brahminism. It will take more than totems like the Sengol and jamborees hosted by Varanasi's Kashi Tamil Sangamam to change Tamil Nadu's political mindset because such symbols relate to a Brahminical culture, which is dated in today's Tamilian politics.

While the battle for the north is more or less settled, Maharashtra might be a conundrum. However, the east and the south stand on the cusp of changes. Will the notified rules for the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, consolidate the minority votes even more decisively for the TMC in Bengal? How will Assam and other northeastern states react to the probability of a fresh influx of migrants from Bangladesh, which the indigenous people fear will further upset the ethnic imbalance?

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- Distressing after-effects (5,5)
 - Exuberant enjoyment (5)
 - West African country (7)
 - Cooperation (7)
 - Maintain by reasoning (5)
 - Saturated (6)
 - Atmospherics (6)
 - Fasten firmly (5)
 - To animate (7)
 - Amount of work undone (7)
 - Sheer joy (5)
 - Having ditched at sea (2,3,5)

- DOWN**
- Use economically (7)
 - Vexed (5)
 - On the decline (6)
 - A tramp (7)
 - Gesture of indifference (5)
 - A salad plant (10)
 - Warm Atlantic current (4,6)
 - Candidate (7)
 - Instruction (7)
 - Thin soft absorbent paper (6)
 - Composer of Rigoletto (5)
 - Subdued in colour (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Danube, 4 Fathom, 9 Ukraine, 10 Plain, 11 Great, 12 Relieve, 13 Make light of, 18 Refrain, 20 Towel, 22 Flung, 23 Speed up, 24 Rattle, 25 Stingy.

Down: 1 Drudge, 2 Nerve, 3 Bristle, 5 Appal, 6 Heaveto, 7 Manger, 8 Bear witness, 14 At fault, 15 Hot seat, 16 Prefer, 17 Floppy, 19 Angel, 21 Widen.

SU DO KU

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

V. HARD

FORECAST

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 13, 2024, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1945
- Phalgun Shaka 23
- Phalgun Parvishte 30
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 4, up to 1.26 am
- Indra Yoga up to 12.48 am
- Ashwin Nakshatra up to 6.25 pm
- Moon in Aries sign

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	26	15
New Delhi	31	14
Amritsar	24	13
Bathinda	26	13
Jalandhar	24	13
Ludhiana	26	15
Bhiwani	26	14
Hisar	30	14
Sirsa	28	15
Dharamsala	20	10
Manali	18	04
Shimla	16	05
Srinagar	16	06
Jammu	20	13
Kargil	02	-07
Leh	02	-10
Dehradun	28	13
Mussoorie	18	07

TEMPERATURE IN °C