



## Inevitable collapse

By calling off their alliance, BJP and JJP have sought to appease their base

The coalition of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) in Haryana was set for inevitable collapse as both political parties intensified efforts to consolidate their mutually antagonistic support bases. By cutting off its ties with the JJP, which draws its support largely from the agrarian class Jat community, the BJP is, yet again, focusing on the electoral dialectics of 'Jats' and 'non-Jats' in Haryana. Going into elections along with the JJP could have made it difficult for the BJP to remain as the preferred vehicle of 'non-Jat' interests in the State. BJP leaders had on several occasions made it clear that the BJP-JJP alliance was not forged on any ideological ground, but only to form the government in 2019, and not to contest elections. The BJP also installed Nayab Singh Saini as the new Chief Minister of the State, a member of the Other Backward Class (OBC) community, by replacing Manohar Lal Khattar. OBCs account for around 40% of the State's population. By removing Mr. Lal, who has been Chief Minister for around nine and a half years, the BJP also hopes to combat the 'anti-incumbency factor' ahead of the elections in 2024, for the Lok Sabha first, and for the Assembly later. With the appointment of Mr. Saini, a Member of Parliament from Kurukshetra and the BJP's Haryana State president, the party is also aiming to strengthen its political base in districts of north Haryana, where non-Jats have relatively more influence.

Haryana saw a violent stir for quotas for Jats in the year 2016, which pitted the community against the rest, and its impact is still felt in the politics of the State. Around 36 castes make up the State's social mosaic, and Sainis, Baniyas, Brahmins, Yadavs, and Punjabis, among others, tend to band together in opposition to the party that is aligned with the Jat interests at any given point. Jats form about 25% of the population and the JJP, which is the breakaway outfit of Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), has emerged as the primary platform of the community which also has sway in the Congress in the State. The JJP fought the 2019 Assembly election on an anti-BJP plank, but after the BJP failed to get the majority in the 90-member Haryana Assembly, the BJP and JJP forged an alliance of convenience to form a government. The BJP had won 40 seats in the Assembly polls while the JJP had 10 MLAs in its kitty. The JJP has the numbers now even after the collapse of the alliance. Despite the party's claim of confidence, abrupt moves in Haryana show that the BJP has reasons to worry ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Pre-poll alliances need ideological affinities and aligned values unlike post-poll relationships that can run, in the short term, solely on the desire to share the spoils of political office.

## Square one

Both Republicans and Democrats need alternative voices to articulate vision

With the exit of Nikki Haley, former Governor of South Carolina, from the U.S. Republican nomination race for the 2024 presidential election, the country is now set to witness a rematch of the 2020 contest between the incumbent, President Joe Biden, and his challenger, former President Donald Trump. It is hardly a surprise that the contest has reverted to this match-up yet again, given that they are the only two leaders who have made the cut as viable candidates for their respective parties over the many months on the campaign trail. On the Republican side, Ms. Haley likely reflected the hopes of some among those who stood for the conservative values of the Republican Party mainstream, which is facing an unprecedented challenge from Mr. Trump and his nativist-populist style of politics. Nevertheless, voters at the primaries and caucuses clearly leaned towards Mr. Trump, perhaps under the assumption that he had left behind, at the end of his term in the Oval Office, an unfinished political agenda to Make America Great Again. On the Democratic side, at 81 years of age, it is Mr. Biden's ability to yet again live up to the rigours of being in office that remains a question mark, even among the party faithful. Yet more worrying from the perspective of the long-term prospects of the Democratic Party is the fact that there has been no other leader from among their ranks with the national stature and sufficient charisma to navigate the party through an election in which they are challenged by the likes of Mr. Trump.

While polls have given Mr. Trump a robust lead over Mr. Biden, at this stage in the election cycle, the outcome of the political clash between the two men will depend on factors such as voter turnout, the preferences of independent voters in swing States, and the impact that the many legal cases against Mr. Trump could have on his ability to campaign and persuade voters that he is a victim of a conspiracy by the Democrats. The absence of alternative leadership in both parties beyond the two current contestants suggests that politics in America has not moved past pre-existing conditions of partisan deadlock, even though it is abundantly clear that business-as-usual politics does not serve the U.S.'s national interest. The best that the country could hope for in the next election cycle, perhaps, is for alternative voices within both parties to articulate a new vision undergirding the American Dream, a brand of leadership that embraces the new paradigm of national and global politics today.

# In issuing AI advisory, MEITY becomes a deity

Until a few years ago, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY/MeitY) was called the Department of Electronics and IT, or DEITY. The abbreviation often led to its overzealous and early attempts to censor the Internet, or regulate technology, open to ridicule. Underlying it is the comic act of government departments that demand divine obedience but do their work with clumsy incompetence. This very avatar was adopted on March 1, 2024, when MEITY issued an advisory to several large platforms for the regulation of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was immediately criticised by both a cross-section of experts in regulation and AI and even the more reticent start-up founders.

### An ambiguous stance on legal status

The crux of the issue lies in understanding the legal basis of the government's text. The term "advisory" lacks definition under the principal legislation empowering MEITY, and the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act). Unlike regulatory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India, MEITY has no residual powers. But still, it has regularly issued advisories at least since March 2020, with four published on its website until June 2022 and none thereafter. These advisories, aimed at "all social media platforms", demand vague censorship without citing any legal authority. Contrary to optimistic interpretations, these advisories are more than mere suggestions. One is even titled "notice", indicating MEITY's ambiguous stance on the legal status of these advisories. They imply compliance without stating clear penalties. In a weak rule of a country like ours it is common sense for citizens and corporations to perform a compliance charade after an unreasonable demand rather than asking for the official's rulebook. Hence, these vague advisories are an offer you cannot refuse.

The recent advisory on AI, dated March 1, 2024, marks an escalation following earlier advisories on generative AI (November 7, 2023, and December 23, 2023). Each one of them, triggered by mercurial policymaking, is made at a frantic pace to serve a media cycle rather than be an exercise in sober assessment. In November, the Rashmika Mandanna deepfake video went viral. In December the Prime Minister issued a public warning to "...be very careful before



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There has been a policy flip-flop on an 'illegal' MEITY advisory on Artificial Intelligence, but it refuses to admit its mistake

believing the authenticity of a video or an image". And in February, a Twitter/X user posted a screenshot of Google's AI response to the question, "Is Modi a fascist?". MEITY shortly afterwards issued an advisory on each of these occasions. The other common link between all three advisories is the opportunistic transparency adopted by MEITY. Here, their full text has been withheld, with only a press release for the two issued last year. In addition to the press release, there are extensive social media posts and press interviews by the Minister for State, Rajeev Chandrasekhar. These reports show that the November advisory cited social media platforms' censorship obligations under the IT Rules, 2021. The December advisory reminded platforms to educate users about Indian law under the IT Rules, 2021. In many ways, these were meaningless other than being official coercion for social media companies to perform more proactive censorship.

The March 1, 2024 advisory is a divergence, as Meghna Bal from Esya Center notes, by introducing an illegal AI governance model that requires licensing of AI models. On this, only Minister Chandrasekhar's press interviews and Twitter/X feed have been the official sources of information. Further, only some Twitter users have published the advisory, indicating selective distribution to media and private firms.

### 'Undefined' terms

This advisory vaguely directs compliance for AI models, including bias prevention and a licensing regime for "under testing" or "unreliable" AI. These terms escape definition under the IT Act, the IT Rules or even the advisory itself. Glaring errors and phrases such as "Indian internet" increase uncertainty.

When many of these issues were highlighted, the Minister's response was to provide direct interpretation on Twitter/X. On March 4 at 11:43 a.m. he claimed that the advisory "needs to be understood" and abruptly exempted "startups". Uncertainty was only compounded as none of the terms in his tweet was defined.

Facing growing online criticism and ridicule, the Minister issued his second clarification on Twitter/X at 2:32 p.m., addressing "noise and confusion being created, many by people who shd know better". This sentence ended with an emoji of a man shrugging his shoulders. But there were signs of a climbdown: "Advisory was simply

that - advise". The Minister avoided any comment on the licensing requirement that goes far beyond the dictionary meaning of "advice".

### Deliberation is old-fashioned now

Dismissing this as just another example of bureaucratic red tape only understates the problem with MEITY's "advisory regulation". Technology regulation in India is advancing under questionable legality. The IT Rules, 2021 that were initially intended to regulate user-generated content, have expanded into the "everything law", as highlighted in the article, "India's juggernaut of censorship" (*The Hindu*, January 26, 2023). Its overreach encompasses digital news, video streaming, and online gaming, prompting many High Courts to question its constitutionality.

The practice of issuing advisories without amendments to the IT Rules, but merely making reference to them, represents a further decline in administrative standards. Worse, advisories are subsequently modified on social media posts without any official documentation. This demonstrates how technology policy is increasingly driven by an influencer culture that masquerades short-term ministerial visibility as public interest. Policy decisions are swayed by press coverage and social media metrics rather than the 'dull and deliberative' processes of working groups and stakeholder consultations. All of this is rarely put to question and has increased administrative arrogance as a response to government buffoonery.

This was not always the case. As Amber Sinha wrote in Tech Policy Press in 2014, the government quickly retracted a Draft Encryption Policy after online backlash. The times have changed as the recent AI advisory maintains its validity with a muscular if not bungling ministerial defence. Even expert and technical commentary is self-censored. Gone are the vibrant and combative challenges that used humour and directed sharp criticism at the highest officers of the Union Government. Developments now signal an environmental change in which there is a greater risk of consequences in questioning policies of digital authoritarianism. The options for us are to pray, be polite and hope for good sense to prevail for there is little else to do. For today, despite an illegal and embarrassing AI advisory, MEITY seems more like a deity.

# Bhutan's opening move, its Gelephu gambit

In an age where connectivity projects, mega-highways and smart cities are a currency worldwide, Bhutan's plans for a regional economic hub at Gelephu, a town bordering Assam in India, are high on Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay's agenda in Delhi this week in talks with the government in Delhi and India Inc. in Mumbai. The plan, launched by Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in December 2023, is to build a "Gelephu Mindfulness City" (GMC) with a unique Bhutanese architectural blueprint across 1,000 square kilometres, as a special administrative zone with separate, investor-friendly laws.

As a carbon-neutral city, Gelephu would include only non-polluting industries (mainly IT, education, hotel and hospital sectors), and would be promoted as an investment destination and health and wellness hub in the middle of the region. In that sense the city is more like newer global peers - planned cities such as Saudi Arabia's Neom and Indonesia's Nusantara than financial hubs with glass-cased skyscrapers such as Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. It would also lie at the crossroads of India's "Act East" plans for connectivity to Myanmar, and on to Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Indo-Pacific region as well as the new India-Japan connectivity plans between India's north-eastern States through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. At the 7th Indian Ocean Conference 2024 in Perth in February, External Affairs Minister highlighted the "need for lateral land-based connectivity across the Indian Ocean region,.... essential to supplement and complement the maritime flows" through "initiatives like the IMEC [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor] to India's West and the Trilateral Highway to India's East".

Despite the lofty ambitions, the Gelephu gambit will require a major leap of faith from India. To begin with, the geography of Gelephu, a rare broad plain in an otherwise mountainous country, poses challenges. With warmer temperatures than in the mountains, Gelephu gets high amounts of rainfall during a monsoon season that lasts several months, leading to considerable flooding each year. The surrounding forests and wildlife populations place Gelephu right in the middle of elephant corridors. Insurgencies in Assam and the northeastern States and just across the Indian border in Myanmar have been an area of great concern in the past, leading to a major military operation (Operation All Clear) by Bhutan's former (Fourth)



Suhasini Haidar

The mega project is a huge gamble for Bhutan but can be a gamechanger for the region, with help from India

king in 2003, working with the Indian Army to drive out militant groups sheltering in the area. As Gelephu is landlocked, it is dependent on other countries, primarily India, to provide the infrastructure for trade and transport out of the special administrative region.

### A necessity for Bhutan

For Bhutan, the Gelephu project is necessitated by its economic challenges. Apart from hydropower, tourism is Bhutan's mainstay, but the kingdom has always discouraged mass tourism, preferring instead a "high value, low volume" motto to ensure sustainability. However, if Bhutan wants to increase these revenues, it must scale up its capacity to take in more tourists and visitors and land bigger planes, which need a much larger airport than the present one in the narrow Paro valley.

The first part of the Gelephu project involves scaling up the Gelephu airport and tarmac to international standards, which will need financing and expertise from India. The growing "outmigration" of Bhutanese youth in search of jobs abroad is another challenge, and the government hopes a mega project such as Gelephu will stem that. Finally, there is Bhutan's most pressing geopolitical concern: pressure from its northern neighbour China to conclude a boundary resolution deal and to establish diplomatic ties. Far away to the south, Gelephu offers Bhutan a way to open itself up in a controlled manner to the rest of the world, while also continuing negotiations with Beijing for a stable border.

For India too, the worry of Bhutan - its only direct neighbour not currently in Beijing's orbit - broadening its ties with China should keep it focussed on the Gelephu project. India and Bhutan have thus far built an idyllic relationship, based on a strong understanding between every Bhutan's king and Indian Prime Minister over the past 75 years. Bhutan's requests have seldom even been rejected, and India is the leading source of investments in Bhutan, comprising 50% of its total foreign direct investment. New Delhi would also be wary of "missing an opportunity" of the kind seen in Sri Lanka's Hambantota a decade ago, which sent the close neighbour to China, caused unsustainable debt and is a project that risks becoming a "white elephant". When it comes to investment in infrastructure, Gelephu's needs will dovetail with New Delhi's own plans for the region: railway lines right up to the border with Bhutan; better roads to feed into the

trilateral highway to Myanmar and South East Asia; cooperation with Japan to coordinate roads and bridges construction in Bangladesh in order to access Chattogram and Mongla ports; and upgrading border posts with all three land neighbours to allow efficient trade. In addition to climate-friendly solar and wind power generation projects, India's plans for a South Asian power grid that would draw electricity from Nepal and Bhutan, with supply to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka would lend itself to more consistent power supplies needed for Gelephu.

Gelephu faces immense challenges, but New Delhi's other grand plans for connectivity confront challenges too. The International North-South Transport Corridor (through Iran-Russia via Chabahar to Central Asia) faces western sanctions, and the IMEC (through the United Arab Emirates-Saudia Arabia-Greece), and I2U2 initiative (Israel-India-UAE-U.S.) are challenged by Israel's bombardment of Gaza and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, nearly a decade of deteriorating ties with Pakistan have seen the Narendra Modi government virtually cut off any plans for land connectivity over India's western border.

### It can recast ties

Obviously, the conditions for a mega-smart city with no immediate returns from the investment envisioned for the GMC, are not optimal at present. However, as the global setting grows more polarised and countries increasingly opt for "tribal" foreign policies that draw more from traditional allies in their respective neighbourhoods, India too must find its tribe in South Asia: a region that shares language, faith, culture, geography and climate. The goodwill generated by India's generous support to Sri Lanka during its economic crisis and steadfast relationship with Bangladesh can be multiplied by similar forays in other directions, such as helping Nepal defray the costs of its new airports by allowing overflight rights, continuing the projects committed to the Maldives despite recent setbacks in ties, and even considering a new chapter with Pakistan, amidst all its other political and economic turmoil. To that end, the Gelephu project offers a chance for the region to conjure an imagination beyond the problematic present - one that is a huge gamble for Bhutan, but also a potential gamechanger for the region, with help from India.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Democracy's course

Political adventurism and its relentless onslaught on democratic principles, continue to ensure a precarious perch for democracy in India, on the three-legged stool of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The

onerous task of propping up democracy in the world's most populous democracy is hardly the sole responsibility of the judiciary. Deeming political funding through electoral bonds as 'unconstitutional' by the judiciary led to the subsequent avowal by the

Chief Election Commissioner to publish details of poll bonds 'in time'. Whether an informed perspective on transparency and accountability influences the electorate is a hazardous guess. **Anthony Joseph,**  
New Delhi

### Parched Bengaluru

The front-page photograph (March 14), of people in

Bengaluru waiting with pots for water, paints a grim picture of the crisis.

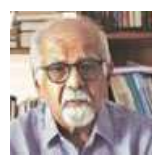
### Corrections & Clarifications

The reference to "four EU nations" in the strapline of "A fresh stance" (Editorial, March 14, 2024) was erroneous. The countries are part of the European single market accord and are EFTA nations.

In the report "Centre signs ₹200-cr pact for anti-drone systems" (March 12, 2024), Vivek Virmani is the Chief Operating Officer and not the CEO of iDex.

The problem is not a resource-based concern, but an issue emerging out of poor policy implementation. Water governance in the State and Bengaluru must be examined as a whole. **R. Sivakumar,**  
Chennai

# Has poverty really dropped to 5% in India?



**Surjit Bhalla**  
is a former member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council



**Jayati Ghosh**  
is a development economist and author of 'The Making of a Catastrophe: The Disastrous Economic Fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India'

**PARLEY**

**N**ITI Aayog B.V.R. Subrahmanyam recently claimed that less than 5% of Indians now live below the poverty line. He made the claim based on the findings of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), 2022-23. Mr. Subrahmanyam argued that the average consumption expenditure in the bottom 5% of India's population, as estimated by the survey, is about the same as the poverty line in India, suggesting that the poverty rate in India is somewhere in the range of 0 to 5%. Has poverty really dropped to 5% in India? Surjit Bhalla and Jayati Ghosh discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Prashanth Perumal J. Edited excerpts:

**The claim is that less than 5% of Indians live below the poverty line. Can you explain how the poverty line is defined in India? Does the poverty line need to be raised?**

**Surjit Bhalla:** We are talking about the change in the level of poverty. In 2011-12, the poverty level in India, based on the same poverty line (as of today), was 12.5%. Now it's down to 5%. If you apply the poverty line, which is today close to ₹1,500 in rural areas and ₹1,800 in urban areas according to the Tendulkar poverty line, you get something close to a poverty level of 2%. Therefore, we have moved from something like 12.5% in 2011-12 to 2% in 2022-23 and that definitely suggests that the poverty line needs to be raised around the world. Extreme poverty is what has been eliminated. We have made good progress, but we have to raise the poverty line. If we apply the World Bank's lower-middle-income line to calculate poverty, we get a poverty level of something like 25% in rural areas and 11% in urban areas, which gives you a poverty rate of 21%. So, there is no question that the poverty line needs to be raised.

**Jayati Ghosh:** Whatever is being used as the poverty line today is inadequate. But I want to highlight a couple of things. First, officially, there is no declared income poverty line right now. What Surjit is using is the Tendulkar line adjusted for consumer price inflation and the World Bank's purchasing power poverty line of \$2.15 a day, both of which would give you less than 5% extreme poverty or extreme destitution. However, there is a problem. The Tendulkar line itself was not really conceptually based on anything. It broke away from the idea that you need a certain minimum calorie requirement to be fulfilled and therefore households that spend at least that much on calories would be above the line. So, we don't actually have a poverty



Farmers near Raipur, Chhattisgarh. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

line in India. The government has not announced any clear poverty line. Also, we have to be careful when comparing this survey over time because the official report makes it explicit that this is not comparable with earlier surveys.

**The survey says consumption expenditure has gone up about 2.5 times since 2011-12, but critics say income has not risen in tandem to corroborate this claim. What explains the gap?**

**SB:** Well, that's in nominal terms. Consumption has gone up per capita by about 40% over the last 11 years in real terms. So, I don't see what the problem with that is. There are other figures that corroborate the claim. Look at wages. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) provides you with data on the wages of different workers. For agricultural workers, wages have gone up 3.2% per year since 2011, so real wages have really gone up. Further, tax data show a reasonably strong, robust growth since 2011 in the wages of salaried workers. So, you have data showing that incomes have gone up and therefore consumption has gone up.

**JG:** It's unfortunate that we have to keep disagreeing even on data, but there are so many different studies that looked into real wage data and show that real wages have grown by less than 1% per annum since 2017. And they have fallen for construction workers. What's more important is that the increase in employment that has been celebrated in the latest PLFS in 2022-23 doesn't actually exist because it's generally due to the dramatic increase in unpaid family helpers. That is, people who work in family enterprises in unpaid forms. At the moment, the PLFS shows us that 37.5% of women workers are unpaid, which is an increase from 32% in 2011-12 and 2017-18. If you look at only the paid employment rate (that is, of



We really do not have any indications that real wage incomes are growing for most working families

JAYATI GHOSH

people who are working and getting paid for their work), it's only 48% for men and 13% for women. So, we really do not have any indications that real wage incomes are growing for most working families.

The National Sample Survey Organisation is showing us that real consumption grew at around 3% per annum. Yes, but what's really happening here is a dramatically increased consumption of the top 10 to 15%, and this is widely documented. The fact is that whatever consumption we have is driven by the upper deciles. We also have many other indicators, like the demand for mass consumption goods and fast-moving consumer goods; they are hardly increasing. There is stagnation in demand for two-wheelers; sales are less than they were pre-demonetisation (pre-November 2016).

GDP growth is now driven by capital expenditure, largely public capital expenditure, because we really haven't seen the same revival in private investment, largely because mass consumption demand is stagnant.

**What do you have to say in response to the arguments made by critics about the unreliability of the government's data?**

**SB:** We need a larger discussion about the quality of private sector data. I'm particularly concerned about data from the CMIE (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) which show that female labour force participation rate in India is lower than that in Yemen and Iraq. This implies that only 9% of women are working in India. Second, regarding government data, we know that the 2017-18 consumer expenditure survey data were not released because of bad quality. The government should have released that data, but it doesn't negate the fact that that data was of awful quality. The point is that the data offered by the private sector is perhaps much worse than government data.

**JG:** I don't agree because numbers in India now are politicised like never before. The consumer expenditure survey of 2017-18 was scrapped apparently because it was of poor quality, but we need to have the survey results and see what exactly was wrong. But look at the way the PLFS was not even released until after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Look at the attack [last year] on the head of the agency [the International

Institute for Population Sciences] that provides guidance for the National Family Health Survey because the survey came out with results on open defecation, etc. that were not to the liking of the government. Look at the suppression of many audit reports like the Clean Ganga mission. Look at the fact that we haven't even had a Census yet, four years after we are supposed to have started this process. Look at selective publication of partial reports that do not provide all the usual details, whether it was the Economic Survey before the Vote on Account this year, which came out more like a propaganda sheet than an actual Economic Survey, or even this particular consumption report which does not give us sufficient details. This is something of deep importance because we had one of the best statistical systems in the world for a low- to middle-income country, and for this to be destroyed in a very blatantly politicised way is a serious problem.

**NITI Aayog's CEO argues that more people are spending on items beyond just basic food stuff like cereals. Isn't this a sign of economic progress?**

**JG:** Absolutely. But this has to happen with an increase in income, right? This is not a surprise and it certainly is valid. It's also true that as there is much more mechanisation, much less walking etc., you need to eat less cereals and you should have a much more balanced and nutritious diet. But you know there's a new United Nations report that just came out and it says 74% of the Indian population cannot afford the minimum nutritious diet prescribed by the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization) for South Asia. So, we are still very far behind.

**SB:** In the 1980s, we all thought calories were an important indicator of poverty. A survey in the U.S. at that time said that 80% of American women were malnourished according to caloric consumption standards. Thankfully the World Bank has changed and got to an absolute income level by which to define poverty.

**JG:** Nutrition is a critical part of well-being. The indicator that is produced by 12 UN agencies put together does not rely on only calorie consumption. It is a much more sophisticated indicator and it's on that basis that they have realised that 3/4th of the Indian population cannot afford the minimum nutritious diet.



To listen to the full interview  
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**NOTEBOOK**

## The journalist's fight against the rumour mill

It is not that easy to prove that something does not exist

Ramya Kannan

**W**inston Churchill could not have imagined how prescient his words would be; how decades after he uttered them, they would be truer than they ever were. "A lie gets half way around the world before truth gets a chance to put its pants on," he once said. This is equally true of rumours too.

Kate-gate, as the infamous doctored photo incident might well be called, has a voyeuristic world in its hold. An image of the Princess of Wales, Kate Middleton, posing with her three children, her arms wrapped around two of them, released by Buckingham Palace on the occasion of Mother's Day, was in the news for all the wrong reasons. The media discovered that the image had been manipulated and spent time and energy speculating about it. Rumours swirled at greater speed after Kate herself admitted that she had edited the photo. The memes and updates fed the relentless interest of the world, as the 'non story' travelled everywhere.

Across the world, journalists battle with the ability of rumours to capture the imagination and attention of the public. Sometimes, this support from the public offers a bulwark of resistance against truth itself, making the job of countering rumours with facts burdensome.

In the Indian subcontinent, it has become common for rumours to gather momentum until rigorous fact-checks lead people to sometimes delete their posts. But rumours are most resilient; they keep cropping up. It is true that some may not be very harmful – for instance, old videos of heavy rainfall often circulate repeatedly, much like boot cuts become fashionable every few years. But others are more significant and impact the life of the person/persons involved. All of them, though, are gloriously at odds, in varying degrees, with the facts of the case.

It is not that easy to prove that something does not exist. This makes a journalist run around in circles to look for evidence that something has not happened. Among journalists who have done this,

the worst job is to confirm that some one is not yet dead. A well-known example is the recent declaration by a fake account on social media that Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen was no more. Telugu film star Sarath Babu, too, suffered a hasty end at the hands of social media, while he was ailing. Journalists who constantly and compulsively trawl social media probably caught this rumour earlier than the families, and the scramble began to "break the news". But how do you decently ask someone if they are alive? Or for that matter, ask them if their mother, spouse or children are alive? We journalists hem and haw. Sometimes we may also come across as slow-witted to the people to whom we say, "I hope all is well. Just calling to check."

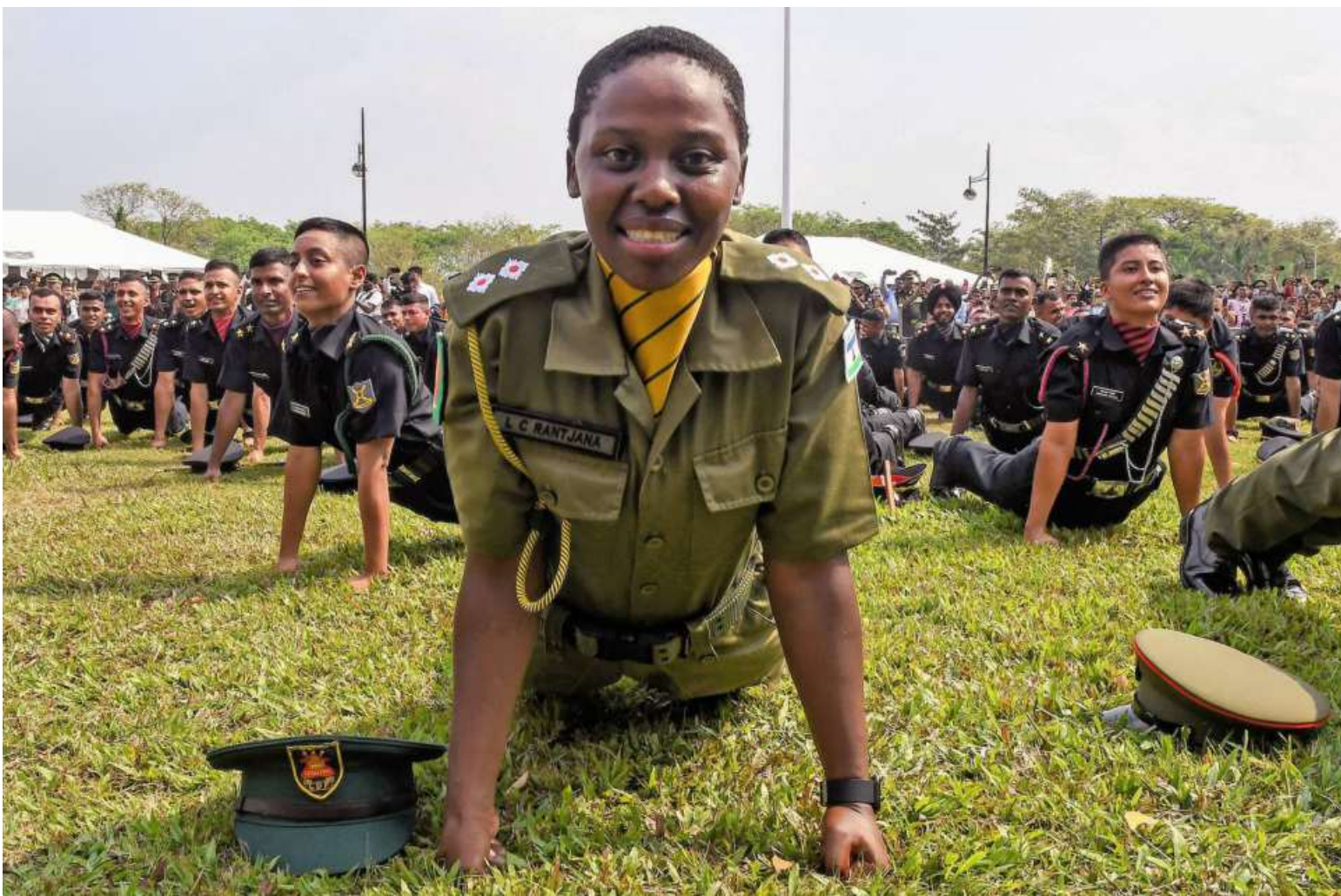
The lack of access to the truth is frustrating. Some of the toughest things to confirm are facts about the hospitalisation of celebrities or political leaders. Unlike parts of the West, where a culture of voluntary disclosure of information by the managers of celebrities is common, in India, you hear only what the celebrity's family or coterie want you to hear. Even those in the know are probably barred from speaking. Fair enough, but it only creates an atmosphere where rumours not only germinate but also thrive.

The case of former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha, who spent months at a private hospital before she passed away, was one such instance. A Tamil news channel announced one night that she had died, but there was nothing official to confirm this – neither a bulletin nor an official release from the government that she was technically still heading. The short period that followed that "news break" might best be slotted in the 'berserk phase' of every journalist's life. It turned out, of course, that the channel had jumped the gun. In this age where there is a burning desire to break news, even if tragic, without confirmation, there is no peace, neither for journalists nor the people involved.

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**PICTURE OF THE WEEK**

### Embarking on a new journey



Newly commissioned Officer Cadets at the Officers Training Academy in Chennai. Cadets who graduated included those from three African countries. The foreign cadets will go on to join the armies of their respective countries now. Velankanni Raj B.

**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 15, 1974

### "Coca Cola not detrimental to health"

New Delhi, March 14: Mr. A.K. Kisku, Union Deputy Minister for Health, said to-day that Coca Cola was neither detrimental to human health nor did it impair appetite.

Intervening in the debate on the expansion of the Coca Cola Export Corporation's activities in India and facilities extended to it

**The Hindu**

by the Government, Mr. Kisku said he was quoting from the latest report of the National Institute of Nutrition. The discussion was raised by Mr. Jyotirmoy Basu (CPM).

Mr. Kisku who intervened at the fag end of the discussion was interrupted by Mr Basu, who alleged that the report of the Nutrition Institute about Coca Cola had been changed. "Now they have managed to change the report," Mr. Basu shouted.

Earlier, initiating the debate, Mr. Basu had quoted from a report of the same Institute to support his assertion that Coca Cola was injurious to health.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 15, 1924

### Rejected by Commons

London, March 14: The Commons to-day by 211 votes to 129 rejected the second reading of the Trade Union Act 1913 Amendment Bill, providing that when a trade union passed a resolution in favour of political objects shall indicate their desire in writing and shall not as heretofore be automatically included as supporters unless they contracted out.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# No going back to square one

The post-mortem of electoral bonds will go on, but let the debate now shift to the way forward



S Y QURAISHI

## NO LAST WORD

Panel on simultaneous polls does not engage with apprehensions brought to its notice. There must be wider debate

THE HIGH LEVEL Committee on Simultaneous Elections, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, has unanimously recommended that polls to the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, municipalities and panchayats be held at the same time. This is no surprise. With Congress Leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury refusing to participate, the eight-member panel comprised those mostly seen to agree with the government's views on the proposal. Its terms of reference also carried the presumption that simultaneous polls are in "national interest". The question, then, is whether the Kovind Committee report has merely rubber-stamped the government's proposal or if its conclusions are a product of considered deliberations. The report says that the panel invited suggestions and comments from political parties, legal experts, former election commissioners, economists, representatives of business organisations and members of the Bar Council. It says that "the committee carefully considered all the constitutional and legal objections" and its members "studied the relevant legal literature on elections, both in India and abroad". Unfortunately, in its substance, tone and tenor, the document does not seem informed by "in-depth research and analysis" and "participatory processes".

Simultaneous elections will impose an artificial unitary character on a federal system of multiple diversities. The report, at best, engages cursorily with this concern. Instead, its 320-odd pages delabour "that separate elections cause a waste of resources, result in policy paralysis and inflict huge socio-economic costs, besides leading to voter fatigue". This is only a harkening back to the *raison d'être* cited by the government in September last year when it mooted One Nation One Election (ONOE). The document notes that 15 political parties have opposed the move, but there is little by way of engaging with, or addressing, their criticism or that of dissenters like Tamil Nadu Election Commissioner, V Palanikumar, who told the panel that "ONOE could potentially dilute the focus on region-specific challenges and diminish the efficacy of local governance". The suggestion of former Chief Justice of the Madras High Court, Sanjib Banerjee — "state funding of elections is a more effective reform to tackle inefficiency" — finds a mention. So do the concerns of former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, AP Shah, "that simultaneous elections hinder political accountability as fixed terms offer representatives unwarranted stability without performance scrutiny." These compelling arguments have been crunched into a few sentences in the report. Unfortunately, the report does nothing more than dismiss these apprehensions as "misplaced".

Undoubtedly, the Indian electorate is, as the report says, "sagacious enough to differentiate between national and regional issues, as also between national and regional parties". But ONOE could flatten the political diversity that has marked India's electoral calendar since the Sixties when the synchronicity of the election calendar was first broken. Much has changed in the Indian polity since then, including the ascendance of regional parties in large parts of the country. The Samajwadi Party's response underlined the fear that "State-level parties will not be able to compete with national parties in electoral strategy and expenditure", which too does not seem to adequately draw the attention of the committee. The panel's report cannot be the last word on a proposal with far-reaching consequences that go beyond political-ideological lines. In days to come, the legitimate concerns of those who disagree must be heard respectfully, and heeded.

AFTER THE SUPREME Court declared the electoral bonds scheme unconstitutional, and directed the SBI to deliver the data in its possession to the Election Commission of India which, in turn, has made it public, the nation is waiting with bated breath. Are there skeletons in the cupboards of the corporate donors and recipients? Has there been a nexus between donations and government largesse? What about quid pro quos?

By all accounts, from the figures declared by the SBI, it would be impossible to match the donors and recipients. In its application to the apex court, the bank had requested for extension of time up to June as it would take time to match the two (something the SC order never asked for) — the all-important information citizens are waiting for, to see the nexus. The SBI should now be asked to give this information even by June, since they have admitted it is possible, to match the two figures. That alone will establish if there has been a quid pro quo between corporates and the government.

The issue is of great significance as it directly relates to the core element of elections, namely political financing, which profoundly influences the character and integrity of our democracy. As the former Finance Minister, the late Arun Jaitley, in his budget speech of 2017, said, free and fair elections are not possible without transparency of political funding.

While the Court must be commended for a landmark judgment, it is important that we steer clear of easy triumphalism. The intervention of the SC, though belated, indeed averted a catastrophe, yet it has not resolved the fundamental issue of transparent political financing. Many critics say we are back to square one. Therefore, it is indispensable that we confront this issue head-on and think of alternatives that can improve the life of Indian democracy.

But first, are we back to square one? Not exactly. The fact is that the judgment has declared the law unconstitutional, and all the concomitant amendments to different laws like the Companies Act, IT Act, RP Act etc have also gone.

It is true that, before 2018, political funding was largely opaque, 70 per cent of all dona-

tions were in cash. But all donations of over Rs 20,000 were reported to the EC on whose verification they were entitled to income tax rebate. After the introduction of electoral bonds, there was a total shroud of secrecy about the donors and recipients. And of course, the suspected quid pro quo.

What's the way forward? What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure that opaque political financing, which is the mother of all corruption, becomes totally transparent?

Corruption in elections has been a subject of debate for decades. Many parliamentarians have offered different solutions. The last serious attempt was made as far back as 1999, when the Indrajit Gupta committee recommended partial public funding of political parties, subject to internal democracy within them. Since inner party democracy has remained a pipe dream, the reform could not take off.

State funding of elections is often mentioned as a solution, to which I don't subscribe, as it is impossible to keep tabs on the money spent in elections. It will also lead to the rise of non-serious candidates, who will find it tempting to make some quick bucks at public expense. What I have been suggesting is the funding of political parties, not elections, based on their electoral performance.

I have suggested Rs 100 for every vote a party garners. We can suggest a higher figure. In the forthcoming general elections, suppose 65 crore votes are cast, we would need Rs 6,500 crore to pay political parties for the votes they get. Will this be enough? But if they get this money from the state exchequer by cheque gracefully, without corruption and arm-twisting of 'donors', it will do tremendous good to their reputation. This proposal would imply a total ban on collection from corporates, which is at the root of allegations of crony capitalism. Besides, their accounts must be subject to audit by independent auditors from a panel suggested by the EC or CAG, and not by the in-house auditors of political parties who only do a whitewash job. Since the number of votes cannot be fudged, reimbursement based on this metric would ensure accuracy and transparency.

Another question is: Why should the pub-

lic bear the cost of funding political parties? The straightforward answer is: Honesty and transparency in governance, a goal well worth the small investment. If some find this idea unacceptable, let there be a small cess. Even one paisa per litre of petrol can fund the entire democratic process quite liberally.

Electoral trusts have been offered as another solution. In fact, there already exist 18 such trusts, but these also suffer from lack of transparency. The latest Reuters report has exposed serious issues. According to Milan Vaishnav, a scholar on the subject, "Trusts provide (just) one layer of separation between firms and parties". Another expert has called it a "semi fig leaf".

I feel the most viable solution is to establish a National Election Fund. Corporates and other private entities could be solicited to donate to this fund with income tax concessions already available for political donations. That would take away the alleged fear of the corporates of harassment from rival parties (read ruling parties). Incidentally, for 70 years they have been donating without any reprisal, which seems to be a new phenomenon — real or imaginary.

According to a study in 2012 titled 'Political Finance Regulations Around the World' conducted by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, an official inter-country organisation in Stockholm of which India is a founding member, out of 180 countries analysed, 71 nations provide state funds to political parties based on the number of votes they secure. This system was prevalent in 86 per cent of European countries, 71 per cent in Africa, 63 per cent in the Americas, and 58 per cent in Asia. There appears no reason why it cannot work in India. There may be some possible questions on the operational details, like funding of new parties, independents, etc, which can surely be discussed.

While the post-mortem of the bonds goes on, let the debate now shift to the way forward.

The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and author of India's Experiment with Democracy — The Life of a Nation through its Elections

## IRRATIONAL EXUBERANCE

Steep rise in small cap stocks, signs of price manipulation, warrant closer scrutiny

STOCK MARKETS IN India have been experiencing heightened volatility. On Wednesday, the BSE Sensex fell 906 points or 1.23 per cent, ending the day at 72,762. The pain was felt across the wider market. The BSE Smallcap index fell 5.1 per cent, while the BSE Midcap index dropped 4.2 per cent. Markets recovered partially on Thursday — the Sensex was up 335 points or 0.46 per cent, while the mid and small cap indices were up 2.28 per cent and 3.11 per cent respectively. However, concerns over valuations, especially in the small and mid cap segments, persist.

Over the past year, small and mid cap stocks have seen a stunning rise. The BSE Smallcap index is up 54.2 per cent, while the Midcap index is up almost 60 per cent. The BSE Sensex is up 27 per cent. There have been huge capital flows into small and midcap funds — data from AMFI shows that between August 2023 and January 2024 net inflows into small and mid cap funds were to the tune of Rs 22,252.14 crore and Rs 13,042.1 crore respectively. The Smallcap index is currently trading at a price-earnings ratio of 28.83 while the Midcap index is currently trading at 26.24, even after the recent correction in both indices. The SEBI, the stock market regulator, has also raised concerns over valuations. On Monday, SEBI chief Madhabi Puri Buch had spoken about "irrational exuberance" and "froth" in some segments of the market. She also indicated that there were signs of actual price manipulation in the SME segment "at the IPO (initial public offering) level and the trading level". Both the Nifty Smallcap 100 and the Midcap 100 indices had fallen following these comments.

Alongside, mutual fund houses are set to disclose their stress-test results of mid and small cap schemes on March 15. These tests would provide an indication of the capacity of these schemes to fulfill their redemption obligations in cases of markets turning unfavourable. Some mutual funds have in fact already restricted flows into their small and mid cap schemes — as per reports, ICICI Prudential Mutual Fund will not be accepting lumpsum subscriptions in its mid and small cap schemes from March 14. A few others have reportedly restricted flows into small cap schemes. These could help curb irrational exuberance.

## JUST READ 1984

Big Brother, it turns out, isn't good for you — even when you are the one watching yourself

UNLIKE A WATCHED pot, people under surveillance — even when it's self-imposed — do boil over. A comprehensive study by the think tank, Institute for the Future of Work, Warwick Business School and Imperial College, London, has found that new technologies driven by artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms are making people less happy and healthy. The smart watch, the step counter, the constant monitoring of SpO2 and heart rates — the "trackers" are doing more harm than good. Then, there's the increasing use of algorithms in the workplace — to set tasks, track and watch workers and even replace them. But the machine did not break in to disrupt lives and livelihoods. It was welcomed in.

It's a curious dichotomy. Prefix "smart" to even the most basic machine — fridge, TV, watch, cycle, screwdriver and even hammer — and the techies, yuppies and wannabes will take on an EMI for the "aspirational" good. Every moment is to be maximised, every task "game-ified" — from how much you eat (remember to log your micro and macronutrients, the app will tell you) to the amount you need to move (10,000 steps, but it keeps changing). People are even judged while they are sleeping (the watch will watch you, and tell you when the slumber wasn't up to the mark). All these tricks and trinkets are meant, the ads tell us, for self-improvement. It would have been easier, cheaper and healthier to read 1984.

Big Brother, it turns out, isn't good for you — even when you are the one watching yourself. According to the study, not all tech is bad. Machines like laptops and services like email enhance quality of life and work. Perhaps it is only a matter of time. The slightly older technologies are now commonplace and are no longer seen as "disruptive". Or perhaps there's something to be said for going on a walk without counting the steps.



ADITI NARAYANI PASWAN

## BEYOND THE BSP

Kanshi Ram consolidated the Dalit identity

FROM THE CHANGING dimensions of democratic politics to the Mandal Commission report, from economic liberalisation to the quest for Ram Mandir, the 1980s and '90s were a vibrant time, marked by new economic, social, religious and political formations. This period also saw a transformation in Dalit politics with the arrival of the post-Ambedkar political discourse of assertion. It used the same social tools of caste, capital and consensus that had been the instruments of Dalit oppression.

This was the era of tall leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan and Kanshi Ram who were instrumental in bringing Dalits together as a bloc by cementing their political identity, cultivating their economic identity and re-asserting their social identity. Dalits were no longer seen as only Congress voters, under the broad umbrella of "Garibi Hatao, Desh Bachao". They organised themselves into a much stronger bloc capable of sending leaders from their own fold. In modern India, Kanshi Ram stands out as the stalwart who shaped Dalit politics. He gave Dalits a voice and a vehicle for social empowerment, the All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). Today, he is remembered as a charismatic gentleman, known for his simplicity and the art of sloganeering.

Kanshi Ram envisioned the furtherance of Dalit rights through economic empowerment. This paved the way for the establishment of BAMCEF. For him, empowered Dalits are economically independent, socially aware and spiritually awakened. This be-

came the first cadre-based organisation of Dalits and other marginalised groups and aimed at establishing wider solidarity. It worked to raise awareness about the economic disparities faced by marginalised communities. By highlighting these issues and advocating for policies and programmes to address them, BAMCEF contributed to the conversation about economic empowerment. Kanshi Ram exhorted Dalit government employees to contribute 2 per cent of their income for the welfare of society — what he called, "Pay back to society".

The intellectual section of BAMCEF consolidated Dalit political consciousness by focusing on the theme of "Ambedkarism — revival to survival" through rallies and conferences. Other segments of BAMCEF like Dattak Grahana (Adoption), BAMCEF (Cooperative) and BAMCEF Bhaichara (Brotherhood) contributed in other dimensions. For example, BAMCEF Dattak's goal was rural welfare. This was done by adopting a few villages from a district and implementing government schemes there. BAMCEF Bhaichara aimed to bring together Dalits who migrated to urban areas with their rural counterparts. BAMCEF Sahakarita worked to encourage "creating one of the largest sections of consumers that do not possess capital, to create an economy of their own."

With all these objectives, BAMCEF was given the nomenclature of "mission" by Kanshi Ram. The organisation had political, economic and social dimensions, in order to

awaken Dalits and politically mobilise them for their welfare in democracy. This organisation went on to provide critical support to the BSP, whose major leaders came from the BAMCEF. But since BAMCEF members were government employees, Kanshi Ram formed the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti on December 6, 1981, for political activities, and channelised this political force in favour of the BSP and Dalit identity politics.

Kanshi Ram emphasised that for Dalits, the solution must come from within the same fold. He insisted the fight was for Parity, not Charity. He also stressed that unless Dalits form part of the same social, political and economic system, they will not be able to help the larger cause of the community. His idea of Bahujan, which means "many" or "majority", continues to form the bedrock for achieving larger ideals of samajik samrasta among different castes and communities on the Bharatiya Subcontinent.

Kanshi Ram brought a social revolution by giving Bharat the first Dalit woman chief minister, Mayawati. His ideas are not restricted to one party. Dalits are not only fighting for their rights but for larger social integration. We might vote en bloc but our identity as Dalits is now seen beyond a vote bank. We now sit on the shoulders of giants but look out for everyone in society.

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## MARCH 15, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### GUNFIRE IN IMPHAL

THIRTEEN PEOPLE WERE killed and 32 injured in a fierce gun battle between extremists and security forces near the venue of a volleyball match in Imphal. While nine people were killed on the spot, four died of their injuries in hospital. Among the dead were a CRPF man and three children who had gone to see the match. Soon after the incident, security forces cordoned off the area and launched combing operations.

### ANTULAY'S RESISTANCE

DESPITE THE TOUGH resistance put up by A

R Antulay, the Congress (I) high command expects that his ranks will soon thin out even if the former chief minister ultimately decides to take the plunge. The central leadership, which is in constant contact with AICC (I) general secretary G K Moopanar, who was sent to Bombay, is adopting a two-pronged strategy to deal with the crisis.

### OIL AND GAS STRIKE

ANEWGAS strike in Godavari district and oil and gas strike at Gandhar in the Cambay Basin were announced by Energy Minister Shiv Shankar, in Parliament. Shankar said gas with condensate was struck on March 10 at

Bhimanapalli in East Godavari district. After Shankar's statement, members from both sides congratulated Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) employees.

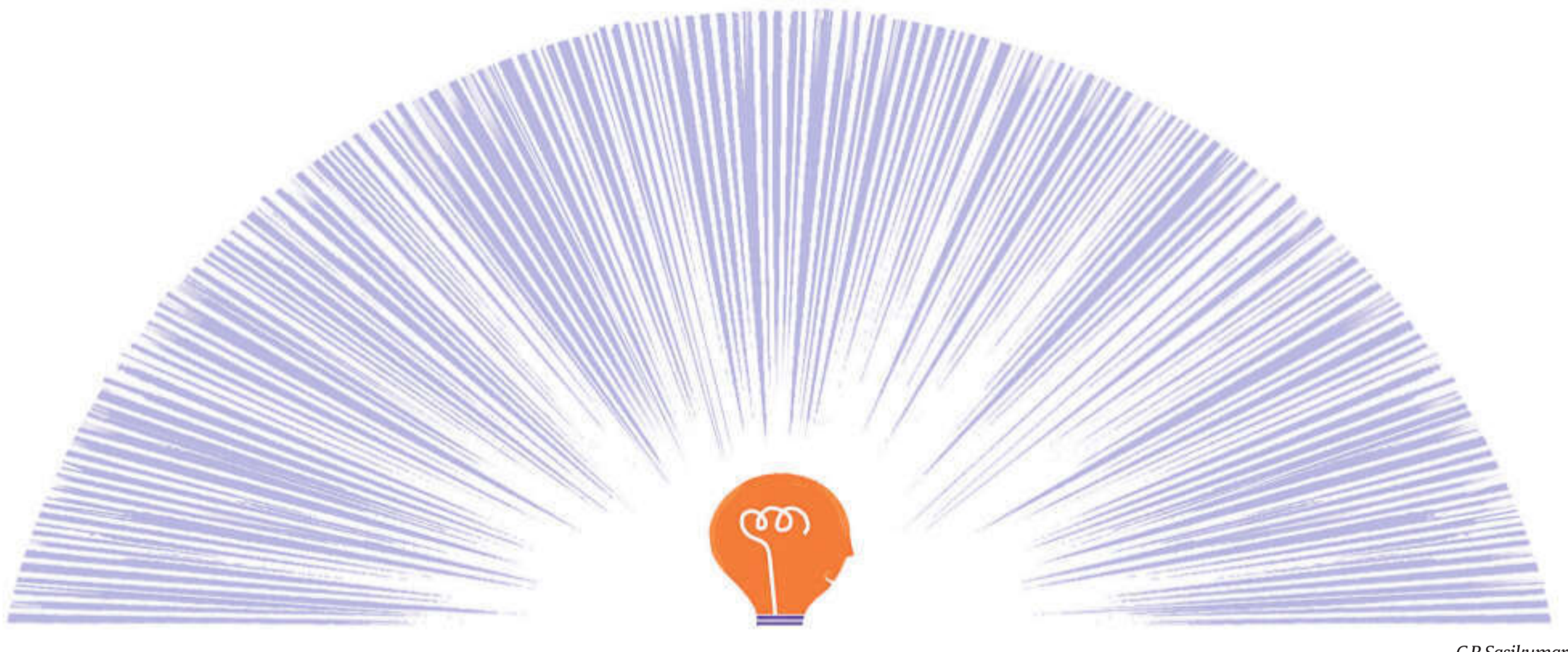
### CONSTABLE SHOT DEAD

RAM CHANDER, AN unarmed Delhi Police constable, was shot dead by three suspected robbers while chasing them in a winding alley off Nicholson Road in North Delhi. The incident occurred around 8:15 in the morning when the two constables posted at a special checkpoint at Nicholson Road saw three boys moving in the area in suspicious circumstances and tried to follow them.

# 11 THE IDEAS PAGE

**DIS/AGREE**  
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A fortnightly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



CR Sasikumar

CBSE has suggested Open Book Examinations in select classes. Is the education system prepared for a new form of assessment?

## Classroom is ready for change

By weaving technology into fabric of learning, open book exams promote inclusivity and innovation



RADHEY SHYAM SHARMA

THE OPEN BOOK examination (OBE) system simply means teaching, training and empowering individuals to translate theory into practice. One may also say that it is a system that protects the basic nature of human beings, that is, to remain curious and innovative. OBE stands at the frontier of India's educational evolution, signalling a return to our roots of experiential learning, as cultivated by ancient sages and encapsulated within our revered texts. This method, designed to solve real-world problems through discussion, debate, and critical thinking, diverges sharply from the conformity-over-creativity model introduced during colonial times.

Despite owing much to this traditional system for producing leaders across sectors, the prerequisite for embracing OBE lies in recognising the need for an educational transformation propelled by globalisation and technological advancements. The steps to achieve this involve marrying ancient wisdom with modern pedagogical practices, thereby preparing the Indian youth for global leadership roles. A major precaution in this endeavour is to ensure that the integration of OBE does not disregard the valuable aspects of the traditional system. The success criteria for this shift would be a balanced educational ecosystem that nurtures creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, with flexibility for mid-course corrections based on evolving educational and global needs.

The introduction of OBE marks a significant departure from the conventional emphasis on rote memorisation... In the shadow of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and deep learning technologies, there is a threat of 'moralisation of masses'.

The introduction of OBE marks a significant departure from the conventional emphasis on rote memorisation...

In the shadow of emerging artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and deep learning technologies, there is a threat of 'moralisation of masses'.

This paradigm shift is essential in an era where traditional academic achievements, signified by marks, are increasingly disconnected from the prerequisites of higher education and the professional world, as evidenced by initiatives like the Common University Entrance Test.

OBE promises an educational ethos where learning transcends memorisation limitations. In fact, the transition began over the past few years when the proportion of competency-based, analytical and applied questions gradually increased during the examinations. The success of this approach will be mirrored in an educational environment akin to ancient gurukuls, with continuous evaluations to incorporate innovative teaching methods.

The journey towards implementing OBE may further prepare the ground to ensure a solid foundation from primary levels. This preparation entails developing critical thinking, argument-formation skills, and a propensity for asking original, out-of-the-box questions. It is a journey from information to knowledge and from knowledge to wisdom, safeguarding our cognitive resources from the distractions of information overload. OBE is not merely an examination reform; it is a step towards developing a new psychological domain where excellence becomes common.

Implementing OBE is a collective endeavour, necessitating engagement from educators, policymakers, parents, and students. The prerequisite for this collective journey is the recognition of the need for collaborative effort to overhaul teaching methodologies, assessment strategies, and educational infrastructure supported by continuous training. However, clear communication and support are needed to mitigate resistance to meeting educational aspirations, with channels for ongoing dialogue to refine the OBE system as needed.

OBE's flexibility offers a lifeline to students with diverse learning preferences and abilities. It acknowledges and celebrates the myriad ways individuals absorb and process information, from auditory learners to visual thinkers. This inclusivity extends to students of humanities, who often find their subjects undervalued in traditional examination systems. In fact, students with different learning abilities will also find their equal place in the classroom and examination with pride as they can express their specific dominant ability rather than just replicating information based on memory.

The introduction of OBE is a departure from tradition, transforming educators into facilitators of inquiry and champions of a lifelong learning ethos. By weaving technology into the fabric of learning, promoting a culture of inclusivity, and prioritising the adaptability of students and educators alike, OBE promises a revolution in education that prepares students not just for the challenges of today but for the opportunities of tomorrow. As we embrace this journey, OBE's promise is clear: To cultivate a generation ready to lead with confidence, creativity, and a deep sense of social responsibility — a true testament to the enduring spirit of innovation and excellence in Indian education and the global market.

The writer is professor, department of Environmental Studies, University of Delhi. He is also part of Curriculum Committee of CBSE

## Open minds before open books

Open book exams will only work if students are encouraged to apply their knowledge, not focus on rote learning



AMIT KAUSHIK

RECENT MEDIA REPORTS suggested that CBSE was considering the introduction of open book examinations (OBE) in select schools on a pilot basis, although it was later clarified that only a study on their feasibility was under consideration. Should the study recommend their introduction, OBEs would initially be introduced in grades IX and XII, and not as part of the board examinations.

As a form of assessment, OBEs can be useful tools to determine the progress made by an individual learner. The New Education Policy 2020 (NEP) recommended a shift to a more inquiry-based, competency-based system of learning and assessment. OBEs require students to be able to think, analyse, and apply acquired knowledge to given situations, thus allowing evaluators to assess their ability to utilise the crucial 21st century skills of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication that are increasingly valued all over the world.

Assessments are primarily of three types — classroom-based, that enable a teacher to assess the progress made by her students and take corrective action; diagnostic, usually standardised, (for instance, the National Achievement Survey run by NCERT), that allow policy makers and stakeholders to understand the health of their education system; and, external, which are competitive and used to determine achievement specified criteria, or to identify those appropriate for higher studies, jobs, etc. While the first two are low stakes assessments, the third is intrinsically high stakes. Yet, all three are equally important and have their place in an education system.

In India, board examinations at grades X and XII have become annual anxiety-inducing, high-stakes exercises, with unsuccessful students often harming themselves. The run-up to the board examinations is nearly as bad, with students being pressured to perform from grade IX onwards. Anything that boards can do to reduce the stress of students, parents, and teachers is a welcome step, and the open book format should be seen in this light.

It is worth recalling that CBSE had introduced OBEs in 2013-14, but they were eventually withdrawn based on feedback from parents and teachers. A major reason for discontinuing them was the lack of preparation within the system. Reintroducing OBEs will require more than just a change to the form of examination. Since such assessments require students to be able to analyse and apply knowledge, teaching in the classroom will also need to

privilege independent thinking and creativity; the business-as-usual form of rote learning will no longer be appropriate. Nor will the kinds of questions presently set in school examinations — exam setters will have to learn how to craft original and imaginative questions that challenge students to think and apply learning. And finally, teachers will need to be trained to evaluate OBE submissions in a fair and consistent manner, which, in turn, implies empowering them and returning to them some of the academic autonomy that has been lost over the last several years.

The NEP provides a broad policy direction within which several steps need to be taken to improve school education and move away from rote learning. Several initiatives will be needed to support these reforms, at both central and state levels, and some changes are already becoming visible. For instance, Delhi became the first state in the country to deliver a fully competency-based board examination for grades X and XII in 2023, through the newly established Delhi Board of School Education. The reintroduction of OBEs would be in keeping with the policy intention of NEP.

Any plans to reintroduce this format of assessment should take into account the learning from the last short-lived attempt to do so, as well as the distortions that crept into the so-called Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) that became overly prescriptive. An ideal solution would be for the board to introduce broad guidelines for such assessments, leaving schools and teachers with the autonomy to administer them as they consider appropriate in the context of their individual schools and students.

As any class teacher will tell you, students in a classroom are usually at varying levels of ability; a small proportion will be one to two grade levels ahead, a similar proportion will be one or two grade levels behind, while the bulk will be more or less at grade level. An assessment, whatever its form, is merely a tool to provide information about where a learner is on their individual path of learning. As such, a student's development should be judged not only by the outcome of a single assessment such as an OBE, but by putting together a variety of progress indicators.

One reason India performed poorly the only time it participated in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was because of our singularly rote-focused assessments — while our students were no less capable, those who participated in PISA had no idea of how to answer application-based questions. Assessments like OBEs could help build the capacities of students and teachers to look at education differently, developing their skills of thinking and questioning, and placing them on par with other international students.

The writer is a former director in the erstwhile Ministry of HRD, and CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (India). ACER is the global manager for PISA 2025

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The notification of the CAA weeks ahead of polls is clearly an election ploy, though the BJP's efforts to demonise Muslims in order to please its core constituency risks creating permanent communal fault lines... This campaign of vilification will only expand social fissures, not heal them." — **DAWN, PAKISTAN**

## Super election year

In more than 60 countries, polls will decide direction of societies ruptured by conflicting ideologies



**ZERO HOUR**  
BY DEREK O'BRIEN

THIS IS THE first time that Mexico could get a woman president. Joe Biden is seeking a second term in the United States. The Democratic People's Party in Taiwan has just won a historic third consecutive term. The fourth most populous country in the world, Indonesia, will elect a new President soon. Sheikh Hasina has won a fifth term in Bangladesh.

In 2024, national elections are scheduled in over 60 countries. Two billion voters will cast their votes. That's a quarter of the world's population.

This is a "super election year". Election booths will be buzzing in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Indonesia. Psephologists and political enthusiasts will gleefully witness the dynamics of power, democracy, and unpredictability as elections play out on a global scale. Those suffering from politicophobia (a morbid fear of politics and voting) would prefer to fast forward to 2025.

One dominant theme emerges from elections being held across the globe this year — societal divisions have been laid bare. From the deeply polarising issue of abortion rights to the contentious debate over corporatisation in agriculture, the fault lines are stark. Many of these elections, including India's, are not just about choosing leaders; they are about deciding the direction of societies ruptured by conflicting ideologies.

**United Kingdom:** Bookmakers' odds are often dependable barometers to predict results in sport and politics. Even though elections in the UK are expected to be held in the latter half of 2024, British bookmakers have virtually already called the result. According to Ladbrokes, one of England's oldest betting companies, the Labour Party, led by Keir Starmer, are clear favourites to win, with odds of 1/10. To give you some sense of what 1/10 odds mean, let me share a similar example from cricket.

If India is playing Afghanistan in a T20 match, India will probably start at the odds of 1/10 — favourites to win. In other words, if you invest £1,000 on the Labour Party winning, you only stand to gain £100. So, as far as the bookmakers are concerned, it's pretty much a done deal for the Labour Party. In contrast, the Conservative Party led by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, has odds of 6/1. What this means is that a £1,000 bet on the Conservative Party will earn a huge £6,000 if the Conservatives win. The populist right-wing party Reform UK (earlier Brexit party), led by Richard Tice, are a distant third with odds of 50/1. It must be pointed out that there are multiple examples where favourites bite the dust.

**United States:** Trump versus Biden rematch. The economy, cost of living, LGBTQ

rights, the war in Ukraine, and conflict in Gaza are some of the hot-button issues which are dominating political debate on American television. From campaign rallies to made-for-television debates, one flash-point is certainly abortion rights.

The seismic 2021 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* and the Alabama Supreme Court's controversial decision equating frozen embryos with children have intensified the cultural chasm between conservative and liberal states. Abortion has surged to the forefront of political discourse, with one in eight voters deeming it critical. Research indicates a doubling since 2020 in patients travelling for abortions, with medical abortions now exceeding half of all procedures.

These have had a profound impact on reproductive rights, stirring voter mobilisation and accentuating enduring ideological divisions. As both the controversial Donald Trump and the octogenarian President Biden line up on the starting blocks for second terms, abortion rights might determine who crosses the finishing line first.

**South Africa:** In a historic shift post-apartheid, South Africa's upcoming general election on May 29 could see the African National Congress (ANC) receiving less than 50 per cent of the vote for the first time since 1994. I am no psephologist, but this could lead to a multi-party government, marking a significant moment for South Africans and the region.

**India:** The last five years have seen the country set many dubious records. Household savings have been at a 50-year low. Three out of four Indians cannot afford a healthy balanced diet. Four out of 10 graduates under the age of 25 are unemployed. Women earn just 60 per cent as compared to their male counterparts. And the Press Freedom Index ranks India 161 among 180 countries. These are the issues which the ruling dispensation will obfuscate. These are the issues which opposition parties across the country will need to amplify. These are the issues which television channels turned cheerleaders will ignore over the next six weeks.

Instead, the Union government will attempt to create a narrative around two laws — the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and the Women's Reservation Bill. You don't have to be a Parliament junkie to know that the timing is suspect. Consider these: While the average time taken to frame rules for a law is nine months, the rules for CAA were notified after 51 months (over four years). The Union government had asked for nine extensions. Then there was the Women's Reservation Bill, passed in Parliament, but which can only be implemented after the Census and delimitation is carried out. 2034?

As the world's largest democracy goes to elections in the summer of 2024, women's political representation will only be limited to the glossy sheets of a slickly printed manifesto.

The writer is Member of Parliament and Leader, All India Trinamool Congress Parliamentary Party (Rajya Sabha). Research credit: Rohini Narayanan, Ayashman Dey, Varnika Mishra

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### SOME GOOD NEWS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Space to pivot' (IE, March 14). Data released by the NSO showed retail inflation remained unchanged at 5.1 per cent in February but below the 6.4 per cent recorded last year. Separate data showed industrial output growth moderated in January from December's upwardly revised number. Inflation in the miscellaneous group cooled off to a 51-month low of 3.6 per cent in February 2024, amid a broad-based dip across all the six sub-categories. Housing, clothing and footwear also eased to multi-month lows in that month, helping to moderate the core CPI inflation.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### A BENEFICIAL PACT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Trade gains' (IE, March 13). Though it took 16 years, India's \$100 billion trade pact with EFTA will bring key benefits to the Indian consumers and our economy. After custom duty is phased out, we can have access to higher quality products. This pact will further foster open trade and closer economic ties. But what is most useful for us is the fact that these countries are known for R&D and innovation and India will now be able benefit from the trade pact. Huge employment opportunities from this pact, both direct as well as indirect, would help our economy too.

Bal Govind, Noida

### BJP'S STRATEGY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'An erstwhile kingmaker' (IE, March 14). Replacing JJP's Mohan Lal Khattar with BJP's Nayab Saini, the ruling party has seemingly dumped Dushyant Chautala's JJP. Ironically, the JJP had been the BJP's saviour helping it to form the government after the last assembly election. The BJP has not only broken its alliance with the JJP but also weakened its ally: there is a buzz that some JJP MLAs could cross over to the saffron party. What the JJP's fate has shown, once again, is the BJP's self-centred use of its allies. Repeatedly, they have found themselves cut to size after forming alliances with the party.

SS Paul, Noida

### INJUSTICE OF CAA

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Between the rules' (IE, March 13). Home Minister Amit Shah describing the notification of CAA as fulfillment of yet another election manifesto promise of the BJP is true. However, the implementation of promises and policies according to any ideology has to conform with the Constitution. CAA violates the principle of equality enshrined in Article 14. Unfortunately, the ruling dimension and its leaders have been indulging in acts that are openly in contravention of the Constitution. Failure of the country, particularly the judiciary, to uphold the sanctity of the Constitution has emboldened them. It is not a good sign for the future.

Sultan Farid, New Delhi

## All Things Small And Vulnerable

Valuations dissociated from earnings potential

Sebi is trying to temper the runaway growth in retail investments into mid and smallcaps by asking mutual fund houses to release fortnightly stress test reports starting this week, and to ensure equal treatment of investors during heightened market volatility as we saw this week. These interventions have become necessary because smallcap funds are drawing in nearly 15 times the money flowing into largecap funds. The Nifty smallcap index is up by 33% in the last six months against a 14% rise in the Nifty 50. There has also been a surge in listing by small companies and Sebi is concerned retail investor may not adequately appreciate the special risks of investing in this market segment. Smallcaps are especially prone to price manipulation, which tends to amplify volatility on display this week, especially in Wednesday's 'Bubble Bath' on DSt.

The rise in listing by small companies is a reflection of India's strong economic performance and a healthy diversion of capital to sectors most in need. But it comes with the added risk of performance disappointment if GDP growth is not as robust as investors are projecting. Valuations in pockets of small and midcaps have dissociated from earnings potential, which bears out Sebi's view of froth, if not an outright bubble. Fund houses are telling their retail clients to cut leveraged positions and are discouraging lump-sum investments in smallcaps in anticipation of a deep correction in this segment. The warnings from the regulatory and the mutual fund industry are an attempt to divert a bigger portion of the rising tide of retail investments towards largecaps, where the market rally may still have some legs.

India is the most expensive emerging market and cannot remain unaffected by a flight to safety if global growth falters. The market is heeding warnings and counter-measures by Sebi over pockets of irrational exuberance. But these may not be enough to protect retail investors jumping into the last stages of a bull market.

## Humans of Business, Raise Animals' Spirits

For those 'there' at the ET Awards for Corporate Excellence later tonight in Mumbai, and for those 'here' reading this column now, it's time the idea of CSR can benefit you by broadening the canvas. As it stands now, CSR incorporates the notion of giving back to society. This could take direct form, such as enabling gender equality. Or, it could be indirect through environment protection that reduces the vulnerability of indigenous populations that have a more direct connection with nature. In either case, the end result is beneficial to humankind. Benefits to other parts of the animal kingdom are collateral to the extent that humans interact more responsibly with their physical environment. Governments step in to address human interactions with fellow creatures through conservation efforts. It's time for business to step in with (profitable) solutions.

These would naturally extend to domesticated animals that have over the course of history improved human existence and helped in securing surplus production. Animals further afield in the wild, too, contribute to material wealth by preserving the ecological balance. Ensuring these are not driven to the brink of extinction through protected habitats and advances in medical research constitutes an evolution in corporate responsibility. Businesses in the country now have budgets rivaling those government had when it embarked on wildlife conservation. Current efforts can be strengthened through PPP. This applies to the development of veterinary sciences as well.

Business brings its own perspective to the table that could improve productivity. Even before that, it has a key role in raising awareness through its engagement with consumers. A beginning must be made to channel resources beyond taxes into the natural world.



### JUST IN JEST

Sing in showers, play music into your ears, but when on public transport...

## Loud People, Get Yourselves a Coupe!

There've been much positive toots about what Indian Railways means to India, and rightly so. The 171-year-old behemoth with wheels does its main job — moving people and freight — rather well. But IR, it seems, is feeling unloved these days, with all that news about fancy new airports springing up in back-of-beyond places, and all those folks clambering up to take a flight. Earlier this week, Southern Railway tried to show off its new showpiece, and sprinkled some stardust on its newest showpiece, Vande Bharat Express. It shared a video on social media that had 12 young femmes belting out songs on their journey from Chennai to Mysuru. The caption for the rolling antakshari: 'Symphony of the joy' (sic). It wasn't so for many — flouting IR rules that say passengers are prohibited from making loud sounds in trains.

In India, public transport often becomes a personal stage for many. Who can forget antakshari battles and shared karaoke kravings on the Rajdhani — which, in far too many cases, became an accident zone with not off-rail, but off-key disasters? Then, there's listening to bhajans and filmi gaane on phones on the metro and even on flights sans earphones. Many people diss talent shows as scripted 'political' acts. While this can be debated, can we all agree that it's plain rude to hijack public space and make it a raucous public one?

TECHNIK AI regulation must be more nuanced than set out in Gol's half-baked advisory

## TO KILLA MOCKINGBOT



Nikhil Pahwa

For every idea you can think of, there's probably an AI model being developed. At least count, the Hugging Face community hosted as many as 547,888 AI models for use cases, ranging from architecture to legal research, online hate-speech detection, speech recognition and video classification.

Alongside this, MLC LLM, a project still in its early stages, allows us to deploy AI models natively on our mobile phones or laptops. This is also the promise of open-sourcing AI. In the future, we might all have our own AI deployments on our phones, which we can train and develop to serve our needs.

With deployment of AI in the military, scamming, risk of deepfakes and Gol's sensitivity towards chatbot outputs — such as the recent controversial output from Google's Gemini about India's PM — there is a case for regulating AI. However, we need a more thoughtful approach than India's recent half-baked and ham-handed attempt. The ridicule it elicited from technologists was deserved.

A recent advisory says that under-testing or unreliable AI models that are available to users on the 'Indian internet' must take Gol's explicit permission, and be deployed only after appropriately labelling the possible and inherent fallibility or unreliability of the output generated. But this is problematic.

► **What is 'Indian internet'?** There is no legal definition of 'Indian internet'. Internet is a global network of networks. This move left AI companies wondering if they'll have to ban Indian users until they receive Gol's approval.

► **Reliable kya?** Most popular AI models are unreliable, their outputs probabilistic.



Missing the wood for the trees

This is why almost every publicly available AI chatbot delivers a different response to the same query each time. Each word it generates is based on a prediction of what the next word is most likely to be, depending on its statistical modelling, and your input context and query.

Unsurprisingly, this advisory was criticised as India's attempt to 'regulate mathematics'. If the probability is set for low accuracy, it gives a wildly creative but potentially nonsensical reply, much like a poet wandering through a maze of metaphors. You can't rely on AI for facts — they often fabricate information.

► **Context fix** The advisory says AI platforms must also ensure they don't permit users to host, display, publish, upload or share any unlawful content. A chat with a chatbot is a private conversation, not a communication to the public. But how can a platform prevent a user from taking a screenshot and publishing it online?

The advisory is also issued under a pro-

vision of the IT Act that specifies due diligence requirements, and doesn't allow platforms to act on content unless there's a government or court order directing them to censor content.

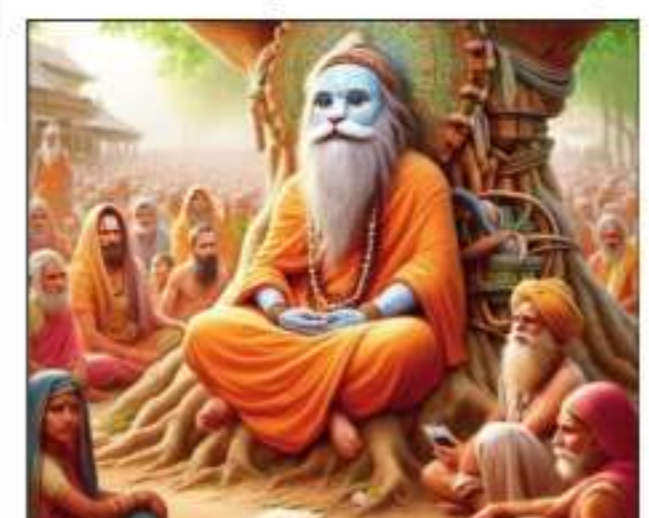
► **Intermediaries?** The advisory appears to presume that AI platforms are 'intermediaries', which refers to the act of being a mere conduit between two users. However, if I'm chatting with a chatbot, who's the other user? If the chatbot is to be treated as a unique person, then will it be liable for output it generates? Any output from a chatbot is dependent on data it is trained on, its training weights and its transformation into a language model, and, subsequently, by fine-tuning, which impacts quality of output.

Every output is also dependent on inputs the chatbot receives from the user as both context and query, and, finally, the probability setting that enables creativity in output. As such, there's no law or legal precedence to hold a chatbot responsible for its output. Also, whether AI chatbots are intermediaries or publishers remains an unanswered legal question.

► **Comply or...** The advisory also demanded impossible feats, like ensuring AI tools don't permit bias, discrimination or electoral process interference.

While it is possible to modify AI tools to prevent discriminatory outputs, ensuring 100% compliance is next to impossible. How will this advisory be applicable once AI deployments and fine-tuning move to personal devices from the web?

IT MoA Rajeev Chandrasekhar clarified on X that this advisory applies only to large platforms and not startups. But there appears to be no such mention in the advisory. And, surely, a tweet can't be a mechanism to modify a government advisory. Later, IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said at a press conference that the advisory is non-binding. But this is contradicted by the fact that the advisory states that platforms are required to ensure compliance with immediate effect and submit an ATR to the IT ministry by today, March 15. It's also unfortunately becoming common for Gol departments to regulate via non-binding advisories and FAQs.



There is no legal definition of 'Indian internet'. This move left AI cos wondering if they'll have to ban Indian users until they receive Gol's approval

Despite these flaws, discordant tweets and press statements, the advisory is still operational and hasn't yet been withdrawn. While the intent of both ministers is sound — to try and ensure unlawful content isn't generated, and the risk of harm via an AI output to both reputation and the electoral process isn't impacted — perhaps a multi-stakeholder approach involving a public consultation with citizens, technologists, academia, lawyers and tech companies could lead to a better approach towards achieving India's goal of becoming an AI superpower, while at the same time ensuring trust and safety for Indian users.

The writer is founder, MediaNama



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Essence of Pratyahar

HANSAJI YOGENDRA

The yogic practice of pratyahar, in essence, is about withdrawing the senses from external stimuli, thereby redirecting awareness inward. At the heart of pratyahar lies a profound recognition of the ceaseless flux of the external world. Maharishi Patanjali, in the Yog Sutras, throws light on the transient nature of sensory experiences, and states, 'The objects of the senses exist in the sensory world, yet these are not the cause of bondage. Attachment to the objects results in bondage. Non-attachment leads to liberation.' Yog Sutra 2.15. Patanjali's subversive genius lies in the idea that suffering is not caused by the existence of things or desires. In fact, it is caused by our attachment to them.

The idea is that despite the incessant flux of external stimuli, our personal interiority and autonomy remains unchanged. And pratyahar is the means to cultivate this capacity. As Patanjali expounds, 'The withdrawal of the senses from their objects is known as pratyahar. It enables the mind to develop the habit of concentration and direct it to the subtler aspects of the object of concentration,' Yog Sutra 2.54. By withdrawing the senses from external distractions, we engender the path for introspection and self-reflection. We learn to discern between what is that we really need and what is that the mind only wants. Learning to discern among them is the secret to a life well-lived.

### Chat Room

## Small Engines Gain Steam Fast

Apropos the news report, 'Bubble Bath on Dal St: Small, Midcaps Catch a Cold' (Mar 14), although Uday Kotak has tried to downplay the stock market fire by saying that the market is nowhere near a bubble, the damage had been done. Sebi chief's statement on a potential bubble in small and midcap scrips resulted in unsuspecting investors losing a huge chunk of money in a day. The real question is why were Paytm, Nykaa and other IPOs with exorbitant valuations approved. If the watchdog ends up creating panic instead of managing risks and markets, it will be accused of being hand in glove with manipulators. To keep up the economic growth, Sebi should chase out manipulators, and retail investors should take sharp corrections as part of bull rallies.

BAL GOVIND  
Noida

The bloodbath on the bourses for companies with less than ₹2,000 crore market cap was waiting to happen as they had run up too much, too soon. The bubble, or valuation gap between net worth and stock price, was bound to burst with the build-up of extra pressure. This reaction is normal and Sebi has stepped in by announcing extra safety filters like stress test for MFs. Many small investors have lost big money in this

carnage, but it is a learning experience for many who dream of multiplying their investments in a short period of time. Equities do give high returns if one is willing to invest for the long term. India's growth story is intact and investors should be patient and trade and invest diligently.

SNKABRA  
Mumbai

## Who'll Win 2020 Prez Poll Redux?

Apropos the news report, 'Biden and Trump are Now Their Parties' Presumptive Nominees' (Mar 14), incumbent US President Joe Biden and his predecessor Donald Trump are all set for an election rematch. A Trump re-election could mean a continuation of protectionist policies, volatile foreign relations and unpredictable economic decisions, while Biden's second term will have to deliver fully on the promises of multilateralism, diplomacy and a more collaborative approach to global issues. The choice between these two paths will shape the future of international politics and set the tone for global cooperation in the years to come.

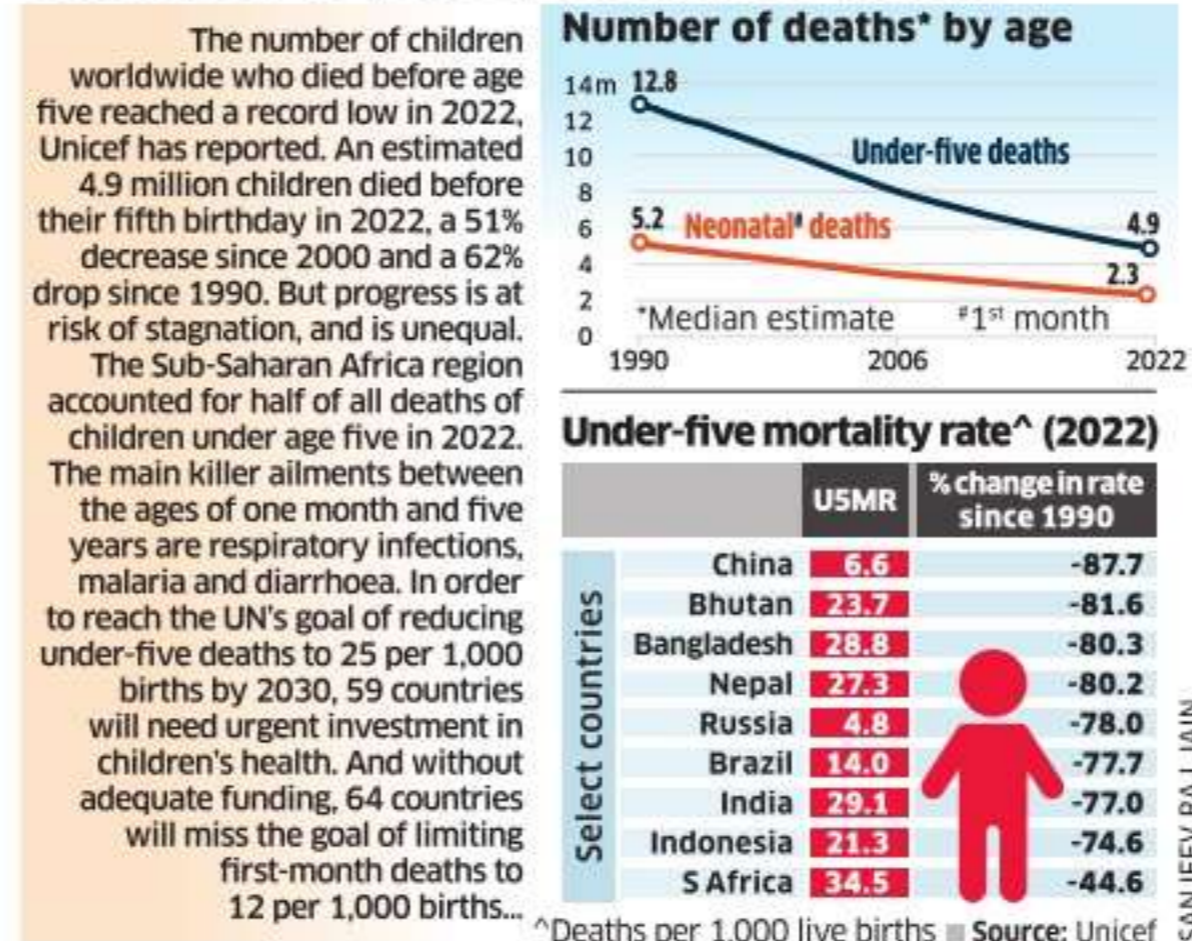
GREGORY FERNANDES  
Mumbai

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com

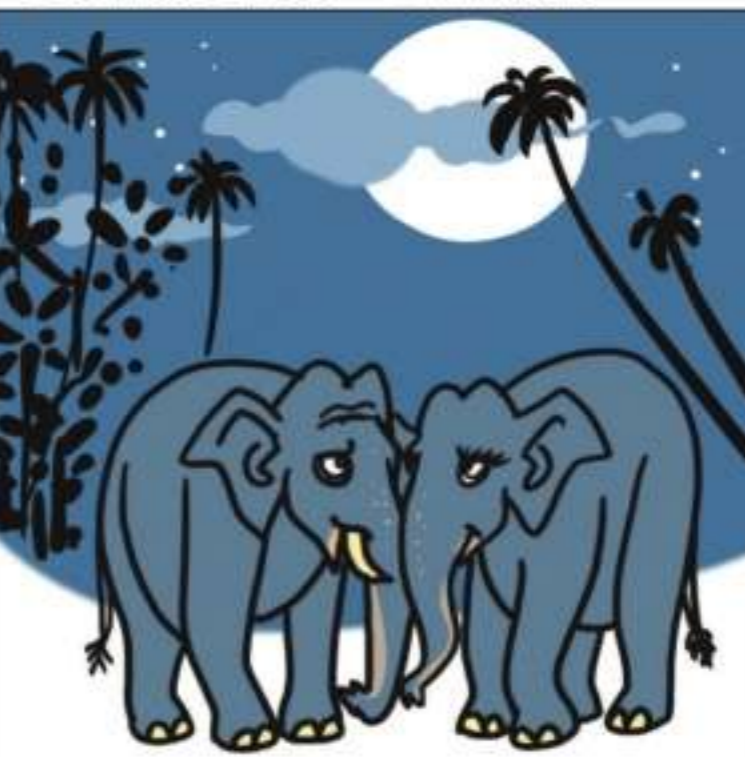
### ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

In suits and sayings, they'll unite,  
For ET Awards, shining so bright.  
Corporate giants will be in sight,  
Tonight's the year's biggest night,  
Where success takes its annual flight!

## Under-Five Deaths Fall



### Bell Curves ■ R Prasad



Darling, a destination wedding in the town is just too risky!

### EYES WIDE SHUT

## Ujjwala Burning Bright?



Neeraj Kaushal

On March 7, Gol announced the extension of ₹300 per LPG cylinder subsidy to poor women under PM Ujjwala scheme. This scheme is expected to benefit nearly 100 million families and cost Gol ₹12,000 crore. There is no doubt that this is an election-time revadi.

Liberals were upset with the announcement's packaging. They complained that women should get a less sexist gift on International Women's Day. Bhakts were happy because the additional subsidy responded to real needs of women, ironically seeming more liberal than liberals.

Yet, has the scheme been a success? Or is Gol throwing money on a lousy scheme for electoral gains? On the face of it, the scheme reflects an incomprehension of rural India's political economy. The countryside is littered with unused LPG stoves and empty gas cylinders distributed free under the scheme. More than 58% of rural households don't use LPG, even though data shows they have a connection. For these households, the money could have been better spent. We will need more than a subsidy of ₹300, covering about 27% of the cost of a gas cylinder, to incentivise rural households to move to an expensive, even though cleaner, cooking fuel.

Yet, Ujjwala has induced some households to transition from burning shrubs, straw, coal and cow-dung cakes — primary sources of indoor air pollution — to using LPG or PNG as cooking fuel, thereby improving

indoor air quality and reducing premature deaths from indoor pollution. According to WHO, in 1990, indoor pollution killed 1.9 mn Indians prematurely (2.2 of every 1,000 persons). In 2019, the number was down to 0.6 per 1,000. The decline began before the advent of Ujjwala, but the rate of decline has increased since 2016.

Critics say that most of the transition to LPG is due to rise in prosperity, with India's growing middle class adopting cleaner sources of cooking fuel. They have a point. Yet, Ujjwala has made access to LPG connections easier. Once, a connection had a 3-5 year waiting period. A hefty bribe could get earlier access. In most states, the waiting period is between a week and 15 days.

Ownership of an LPG connection and its occasional use are symbols of prestige in rural India, and, thus, they have been a vote winner in the past. Gol says LPG connectivity is 100%. This data is exaggerated, as many families have multiple connections, and some have none. But access has no doubt dramatically improved. World Bank said access to clean cooking fuel and tech improved from 22% in 2000 to 68% by 2020.

What is troublesome is the fact that many households that have received an LPG connection do not use it. During my field visits across northern rural India, I found that while most house-

holds had LPG stoves, a majority did not use them for cooking because, they said, the cost of using LPG was too high. The most recent NFHS confirms these field impressions: only 42% of rural households use LPG or natural gas as their primary cooking fuel. The rest use straws, shrubs, coal and cow-dung cakes.

Even in urban India, less than 100% of households use LPG or PNG as cooking fuel. Around 11% of urban households still use coal, cow-dung cakes, shrubs, straws and kerosene.

The increase in subsidy will bring the cost of a 14.2 kg LPG cylinder down from ₹1,103 to ₹803. This will no doubt benefit families that are using LPG. But would this price be sufficiently low to incentivise families with an LPG connection but cannot afford to buy the gas cylinder to transition to LPG? A few may.

But the majority will not if their alternative sources of cooking fuel — cow pats, straws and shrubs — are free, or nearly free. On the other hand, higher subsidies will create a black market to sell subsidised LPG cylinders at higher rates to restaurants or other commercial users.

The success of PM Ujjwala requires not just easy access to an LPG connection but also an increased focus on transitioning to cleaner cooking fuel: an awareness that LPG stove use won't only ease cooking for women — whose discomfort is sadly not a pressing concern in many households — but improve air quality, and, in turn, the entire family's health. Focusing on this narrative is essential to transition to cleaner cooking fuels in India successfully.

The writer is professor of social policy, Columbia University, US



Unhealthy choice



## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

## The case for one nation, one poll

Kovind panel's recommendations on simultaneous polls need to be discussed with an open mind — in Parliament and assemblies

The Ram Nath Kovind panel has come up with a detailed and plausible plan to have simultaneous elections for all three tiers of government. It has proposed simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies with polls to local bodies held within 100 days of these. The idea of one nation, one poll is a welcome one. The challenge, however, is in the procedural details and the fear that it militates against the federal structure and spirit of the Constitution. These are concerns that need wider consultations and a broader political consensus. The report needs to be discussed in Parliament and state assemblies.

At the outset, simultaneous elections are welcome for they will help avoid disruptions in governance due to frequent elections. All elections have become competitive and expensive exercises. Governance is stalled when parties and leaders turn on the campaign mode and the model code of conduct kicks in. Less frequent elections will enable leaders to focus on governance. This view of the Kovind panel, surely, has merit. But when federal relations are fraught and the Centre is suspected of championing a unitarian idea of the nation — one-nation-one-poll is perceived by the Opposition as an extension of the BJP's ideological preference for homogeneity and uniformity with respect to language, customs, faith, dress, and diet — the push for simultaneous elections will be viewed as the imposition of the political agenda of the party in office.

It needn't be so. One, simultaneous elections were the norm in the first decade after Independence, until the Nehru Cabinet blotted the copybook by dismissing the CPI-led government in Kerala in 1959. Thereafter, the Congress and the Janata Party, in the post-Emergency interregnum, weaponised Article 356 and dismissed Opposition-led state governments numerous times, until the Supreme Court stepped in with the *Bommai* judgment in 1994. Two, voters are intelligent enough to recognise the federal balance and choose parties/candidates as per the House they are voting to elect. Voting patterns for general and assembly elections in different states — Delhi, Odisha, Kerala, and West Bengal, for instance — suggest this awareness among voters.

The challenge before the Union government now is to convince the Opposition and state governments that the merits of simultaneous polls outweigh fears about the centralisation of the polity. And the Opposition should realise that it is not the process that is failing them but their politics.

## In Kathmandu, a new coalition in office

Nepal's Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal has won a trust vote in Parliament after ditching his erstwhile coalition partner, the Nepali Congress (NC), and forming a new alliance with the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML). This is the third coalition formed by Dahal, also known as Prachanda, since the general election of November 2022. Dahal has tenaciously clung to power, even though his Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist Centre (CPN-MC) does not have the numbers to survive on its own.

It is perhaps telling that the votes secured by Dahal in the three trust votes in Parliament since December 2022 have fallen from 268 to 172 to a mere 157 this time around. Such fragile coalitions are unlikely to lead to political stability at a time when Nepal is grappling with a host of issues, including a much-needed impetus for development. The CPN-MC's relationship with the Nepali Congress had frayed in recent months over issues such as differences over a provincial election and the signing of a petition by almost half of the latter's members demanding the restoration of a Hindu State.

The coming together once again of Nepal's two main Communist parties will go down well in Beijing, which was behind a project in 2018 that resulted in their short-lived merger. It also comes at a time when China is pushing to revive several major infrastructure projects. India has considerable stakes in a stable Nepal, especially after massive investments to create connectivity for trade, energy and people-to-people contacts. New Delhi must be prepared to play the long game as Nepal's political parties attempt to find an equilibrium, without in any way being seen as backing any single player.

# Making sense of China's anti-corruption agenda

Its expansion into financial and other economic sectors is aimed at targeting institutions and positions where power and resources lie, to prevent economic instability

Chinese Premier Li Qiang presented his first government report on March 5 at the annual legislative session of the National People's Congress, one-half of the country's rubber-stamp parliament. The party-State attempted to present a positive picture of the economic situation and send out a message of policy continuity through the media and orchestrated events.

Unprecedented unemployment among urban youth between 16 and 24 years of age, local government debt, a struggling real estate market, and sluggish domestic demand are some of the economic issues facing the Chinese leadership as it attempts to transition to a new growth model with less reliance on investment in infrastructure and real estate.

Rather than embarking on the required structural reforms, however, the Communist Party of China (CPC) leadership under general secretary Xi Jinping has, in the past decade, responded with propaganda and by expanding the party's control over State functions. For example, it has launched a country-wide education

campaign to reinforce Xi's policy lines and ideology and attempted to manage narratives to push positive messages on the economy.

The Third Plenum of the 20th Central Committee of the CPC did not take place as it normally would have at the end of last year. It is this plenum of the central committee that traditionally provides the blueprint for economic policy and reforms in China. In yet another tradition-breaking move, the premier did not hold a press conference at the end of the "two sessions" of the Chinese parliament for the remainder of the current term. Together, these developments indicate the leadership's diminishing confidence in laying out for public discussion its economic thinking and policies.

In November last year, the CPC expanded its direct control over the financial sector by establishing a new body, the Central Financial Work Commission, which took over the functions of overseeing the financial sector from the State Council, thereby further reducing the role of State bodies in economic governance.

Another striking feature of the CPC's response to China's economic crisis is a further intensification of the anti-corruption campaign. Since 2020, it has increasingly used the anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), to try and address financial instability due to reckless credit lending by banks, local government debt,

and corruption in State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and financial regulatory bodies.

In Xi's first and second terms as general secretary of the CPC, it was cadres from the political and legal apparatus — which manages China's police, courts, and procuratorates — and the military that were predominantly targeted. Current trends suggest an additional group being targeted, namely, party-appointed officials in rating agencies, insurance companies, policy banks, SOEs, and asset management companies. The number of such officials under investigation has gone up rapidly after the 20th party Congress in October 2022 at which Xi was confirmed as general secretary for a third term. Nearly 300 such cadres have been investigated compared to 440 cadres investigated during Xi's first term from 2012 to 2017. The figures are even more significant when contrasted to that in Xi's second term from 2018 to 2022 when the CCDI probed 111 officials.

In the banking sector, more than three dozen senior executives and officials of the country's biggest banks, namely the Bank of China (BoC), China Construction Bank, Agricultural Bank of China, and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) have been investigated. Some prominent examples include a former senior official at the ICBC, Zhang Hongli, and the former head of the BoC, Liu Liang. The list of fallen offi-

cial also includes Li Xiaopeng and Tang Shuangning, who had both served as party secretary and chairman of the Everbright Group, a Fortune Global 500 company. To give a sense of the scale and importance of these actions, note that each of the four Chinese banks mentioned is larger than the State Bank of India, India's largest bank, by several orders of magnitude across revenue, net income and total assets, among other indicators. The CCDI has also probed some 80 senior officials from other SOEs since the 20th party Congress covering a wide range from globally-ranked energy majors like the China National Petroleum Corporation, Sinopec and PetroChina to those in the railway, aviation, shipping, telecom, and electricity sectors. These include officials from the China Railway Qinghai-Tibet Group Company as well as party committee members in the China National Nuclear Corporation, Central, provincial and sub-provincial level officials have all come within the net with trials being held across the length and breadth of the country.

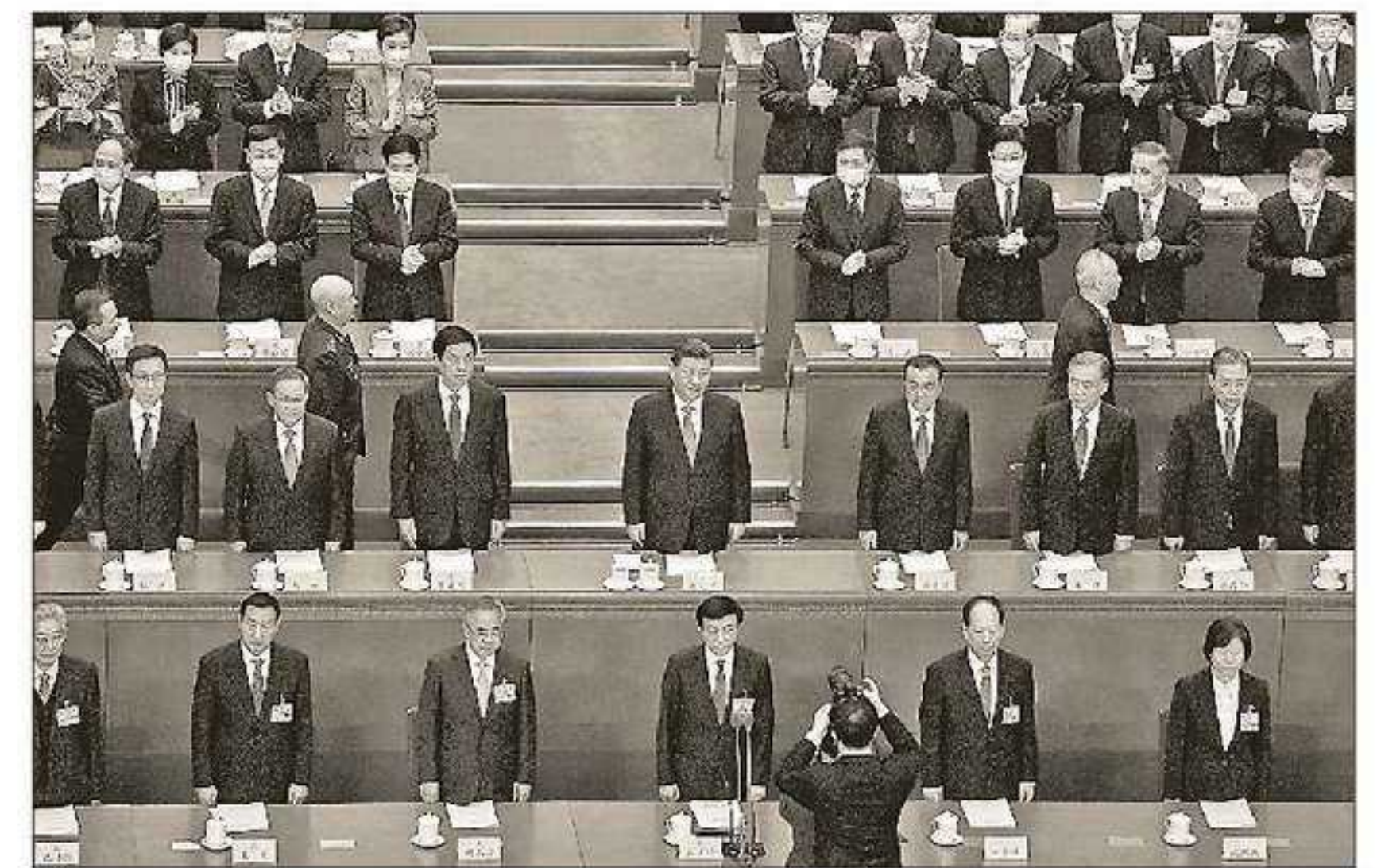
The expansion of Xi's anti-corruption campaign into the financial and other economic sectors is aimed at



Devendra Kumar



Jabin T Jacob



A striking feature of the CPC's response to China's economic crisis is a further intensification of the anti-corruption campaign

AFP

targeting the institutions and positions where power and resources lie, to prevent dangers to economic stability. The urgency is underscored by Premier Li in his work report when he says, "We must tighten up financial and economic discipline and intensify oversight on accounting. Prestige and vanity projects and wasteful and excessive spending will be strictly prohibited."

The objective is also to strengthen the CPC's control. The fact that several officials under investigation are also members or heads of party committees — the nucleus of decision-making and source of the CPC's direct control over these institutions — underlines the political significance of the campaign. It also suggests that greater party control is likely to be a defining feature of the Chinese economy for the foreseeable future. This is a reality that must be acknowledged and factored into approaches and policies that countries frame towards China.

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targeting the institutions and positions where power and resources lie, to prevent dangers to economic stability. The urgency is underscored by Premier Li in his work report when he says, "We must tighten up financial and economic discipline and intensify oversight on accounting. Prestige and vanity projects and wasteful and excessive spending will be strictly prohibited."

The objective is also to strengthen the CPC's control. The fact that several officials under investigation are also members or heads of party committees — the nucleus of decision-making and source of the CPC's direct control over these institutions — underlines the political significance of the campaign. It also suggests that greater party control is likely to be a defining feature of the Chinese economy for the foreseeable future. This is a reality that must be acknowledged and factored into approaches and policies that countries frame towards China.

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## Assam's repeal of Muslim marriage law is a mistake

The reported move of the government of Assam to repeal the state's 90-year-old Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act is, to say the least, ill-advised. The decision that marriages among Muslims should instead be registered under the Special Marriage Act 1954 smacks of ignorance about the nature and objects of this Act.

Marriages among Muslims are solemnised by a *nikah* ceremony conducted by a religious official called *qazi* (also spelt as *kazi*). The *qazis* prepare and issue to the parties a signed *nikah-nama* (marriage certificate) containing all relevant information about the marriage, parties thereto and mutually settled terms of marriage. They also prepare *talaq-namas* (divorce-deeds) as and when asked for by interested persons. The *qazis* preserve with them copies of all marriage and divorce deeds they issue, and all these documents are admissible under the law as proof of related transactions.

During the Mughal rule in the country, official *qazis* were designated by the local governments for various administrative units under their control. The British rulers inherited the system and maintained it for a long time. As per necessity, they associated designated *qazis*, along with selected pundits, with the civil courts as "native law officers" to expound to the British judges the principles of Hindu and Muslim laws applicable to disputes that were under the then charters of governance to be settled in accordance with the parties' respective personal laws.

After the system of associating native law officers with the courts was abolished by a law enacted in 1864, the government altogether stopped designating *qazis*. Muslim leaders demanded that it should continue nominating official *qazis* to perform non-judicial functions. A Mohammedan Marriage and Divorce Registration Act was then enacted in 1876 for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (then constituting a single province) re-empowering the government to designate official *qazis* by the title 'Mohammedan Registrars' to perform the limited function of solemnising marriages and preparing divorce documents. These so-called registrars were to be picked from religious functionaries and were no different from *qazis* — which term was seemingly avoided to dispel the impression that the nominees had any adjudicatory powers.

The Act laid down the procedure for preparing records of marriages and divorces and provided forms for the same. Registration under the Act was kept optional, and it was clarified that mere registration would not validate an otherwise invalid marriage or divorce. The enacted by the central legislature in 1886 amended the Bengal Act under reference to the effect that the records of marriages kept under it should be periodically transmitted to the local registrar-general's office.

In 1912, when Bihar and Orissa were separated from Bengal, the 1876 Act remained in force in both the new provinces with necessary adaptation. While in Odisha it was locally re-enacted two years after Independence, it remains in force in Bihar and the newly created state of Jharkhand. Assam, which was initially under the control of

the Bengal government, had been made a separate administrative unit in 1874 and was reorganised as a new province in 1921. The Bengal Act of 1876 was locally re-enacted there in 1935 under the name Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act. When in 1971 a separate state of Meghalaya was carved out of Assam, the 1935 Act was retained in force there.

In 1955 the Hindu Marriage Act provided for registration of all marriages governed by it with marriage registrars to be designated by state governments, leaving it to the latter to decide whether registration would be optional or compulsory. Administrative rules framed under the Act in various states (including Assam) generally kept it optional until the Supreme Court directed, in the *Seema* case of 2006, that all marriages everywhere in the country must be compulsorily registered.

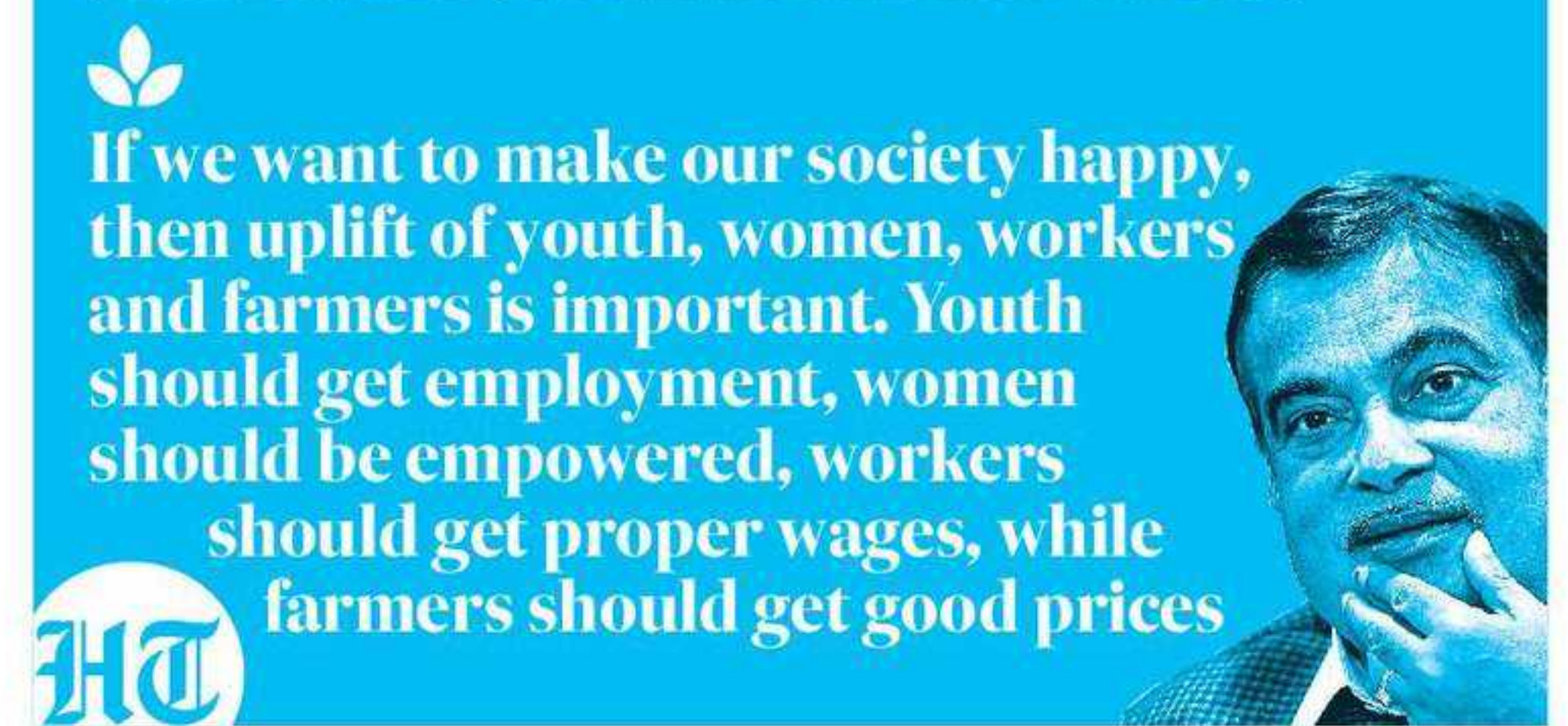
The states then either amended their existing registration rules accordingly or enacted new laws for the mandatory registration of marriages. Compulsory registration would, of course, not affect the nature of marriages which would continue to be governed by the parties' personal law. The Assam Hindu Marriage Registration Rules of 1961 too were amended along the same lines. The Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Acts in force in the six states mentioned above, or the rules framed under them, were also amended to comply with the apex court directive.

The case of the Special Marriage Act 1954 is essentially different. It provides for solemnisation of civil marriages to be governed by its own provisions and not by any personal law. Additionally, the Act provides the facility of voluntarily converting a pre-existing religious marriage solemnised under the personal law of the parties into a civil marriage. The married couples, if they mutually decide to bring their marriage under the civil marriage regime, have to register it for such an effect under Section 15 of the Act. This special provision of the Act is not an administrative but a substantive legal provision which, if availed, would entirely change the nature of marriage and take it out of the ambit of the personal law hitherto applicable to it.

Requiring marriages among Muslims to be registered under this exceptional provision of the Special Marriage Act would amount to forcing the parties to altogether abandon their personal law. Singling out a chosen community for such a drastic step, while leaving marriages among the other communities to be governed by their respective personal laws, cannot stand the constitutional test of equal justice and non-discrimination. Such an extraordinary measure full of revolutionary implications cannot be taken in a particular state. Of course, if Parliament in its wisdom decides to adopt such a measure — repealing at the same time all other marriage and marriage registration laws wherever in force — this may be seen as a simpler way to bring the nation under a Uniform Civil Code.

Tahir Mahmood is professor of law and former member, Law Commission of India. The views expressed are personal

NITIN GADKARI | UNION MINISTER FOR ROAD TRANSPORT



## Why NATO's new roles may be one too many

Tensions are rising again in Europe. Even as Sweden reversed two centuries of neutrality to become the 32nd member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), various political actors are adding fuel to the fire. President Vladimir Putin warned of total annihilation if NATO put "boots on the ground" in Ukraine. That remark was set off by a seemingly mystifying statement by President Emmanuel Macron, to the effect that troops on the ground should not be ruled out. A flurry of denials by other members followed. No one wants to walk erratically into World War III. Meanwhile, NATO declared the Indo-Pacific as a priority. That may be a problem for many.

Macron's comment was made against a specific background. France has been championing an independent foreign policy for decades, much to the chagrin of the United States. On a visit to China, he even warned of getting dragged into a US war over Taiwan and resisting NATO plans to open an office in Japan. Macron has also been at the forefront of trying to ease relations with Russia and faced criticism for sending the least arms aid to Ukraine. Paris tried to retrieve its status with a grand conference on Ukraine on February 26. In response to a question, Macron simply said that nothing should be ruled out. Putin reacted predictably with threats of annihilation, as did NATO members in rejecting it.

A report notes pessimism across the European Union (EU) with just 10% believing in a Ukrainian victory. Twice as many expect an (undefined) Russian win. Those polled in Poland, Portugal, and Sweden preferred (but did not expect) Ukraine to take back its territory, while most wanted Kyiv to accept a settlement. Meanwhile, as European GDP growth falters, even the projected 0.6% rise is attributable ironically to a stronger than expected Russian economy. Europe's largest imports are from China, with some 2,000 ships plying every day in the Indo-Pacific. As officials echo the need to ensure a "rules-based order", it seems the circle has closed. NATO now wants a place in the Indo-Pacific.

Recently, NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg castigated China's mild reaction to Alexei Navalny's death as an "internal matter", observing this as another indicator of Beijing quietly supporting Putin on Ukraine. He warned that if Russia succeeded against

Ukraine, China would then feel free to act against Taiwan. That's rather combative talk. All this when Europe is being accused by former President Donald Trump of spending little on defence. His threat that the US would stay out, if Russia invaded countries not "paying up" was outrageous, but it is true that only three NATO countries are spending the required 2% of GDP on defence, even after the 2014 Crimea invasion. This may rise to 18 of an expanded 31 countries. But all this is going to take time, as China rises.

At the Vilnius Summit, NATO for the first time identified China as a "challenge", even while holding regular military staff talks with Beijing since 2010. In December, the European Union also had its summit with China, in a process that started in 1998. The key issue for the EU is the huge negative trade imbalance of €400 billion, and China's support to Russia. Neither is likely to change much. So as before, no joint statement was issued. For China, the worry is that NATO communiqués are now signed onto by Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand. These NATO Plus countries will transition to a new Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP), for greater integration, but remain outside Article 5's collective defence.

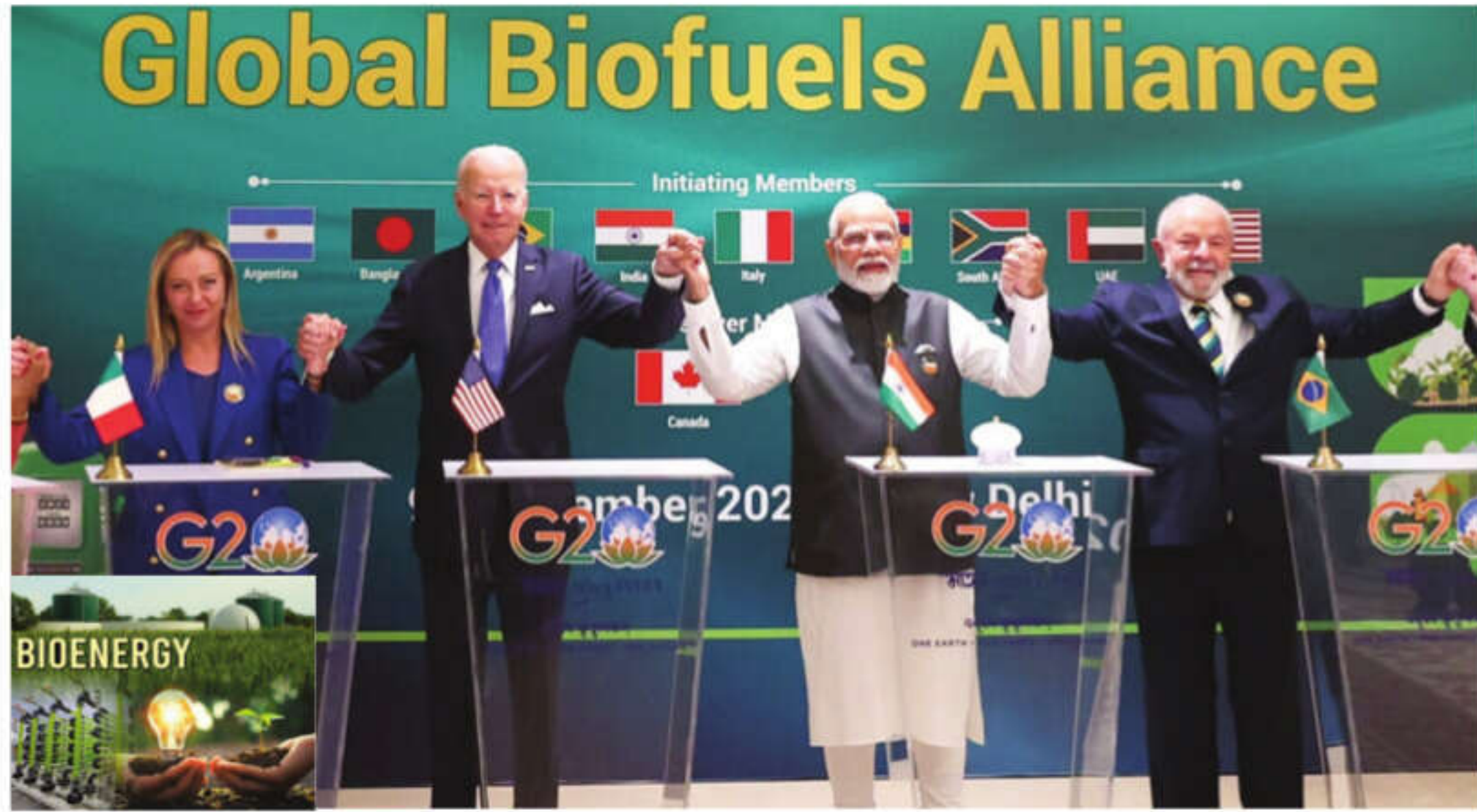
NATO now declares the Indo-Pacific as having a direct relation to security. But important actors are wary. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) likes the EU as a strategic partner but recently held its first-ever military exercise, stressing ASEAN centrality, rather than choosing sides in a world of competition between great powers. India's foreign minister distanced Delhi from an explicit recommendation by the US Senate India Caucus to get India to be part of NATO Plus. Delhi has worked with NATO on piracy, and both have a raft of common interests, like climate security and terrorism.

China is India's second-largest trading partner, but no such consideration will limit Delhi's actions to defend itself to the full in this part of the world. Meanwhile, it would be advisable to talk and engage with NATO, and understand its proposals to be a smart security enabler. All friends are welcome, as long as they stand their ground.

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Ethanol Ambitions

Bioenergy stands as a pivotal force in India's pursuit of sustainable development, offering multifaceted benefits beyond energy production, contributing to the circular economy, and promoting an environmentally conscious lifestyle (LiFE). In addition, it unlocks carbon credit potential and drives decarbonisation efforts, making a significant contribution to achieving Nationally Determined Contributions for emission reductions. This aligns with climate goals, enabling India to make tangible strides in mitigating climate change impacts globally



The Global Biofuel Alliance, announced at the G20 summit on 9 September 2023 in New Delhi, has the potential to generate opportunities worth billions of US dollars in the coming years. The global ethanol market was valued at \$99.06 billion in 2022 and is predicted to grow at a CAGR of 5.1 per cent by 2032, surpassing \$162.12 billion by 2032. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), there is a 3.5-5x biofuels growth potential by 2050 due to Net Zero targets, creating a significant opportunity for India.

fuels completely, especially to decarbonize the transport sector. This initiative will also align with India's ambitious goal of achieving Net Zero by 2070.

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DR J P GUPTA

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The government has undertaken important initiatives such as the National Bioenergy Programme, SAMARTH Scheme, and SATAT (Efficient Bioenergy technologies), among others. Augmenting Farmers' Livelihoods: Farmers, being the backbone of societies, are benefited by agricultural growth. Bioenergy initiatives offer farmers a pathway towards enhanced livelihoods by providing opportunities for additional income streams. Through the cultivation of biomass feedstock such as agricultural residues, energy and protein rich crops, and organic waste, farmers can diversify their revenue sources while contributing to the renewable energy sector.

resources. A paradigm shift that sees Biomass as the new crude oil is needed as Bioenergy serves as the cornerstone of fortifying India's energy security by reducing reliance on fossil fuel imports and broadening the energy portfolio. As a locally sourced renewable resource, bioenergy mitigates vulnerabilities linked to geopolitical tensions and fluctuating global energy markets as well as the vicissitudes of the oil cartel. Additionally, decentralized bioenergy facilities enable communities to tap into local resources, strengthening energy resilience at the grassroots level. There is a need to set up Bio Compressed Plants and world-class-sized bio-refineries in almost all states in India. India needs ethanol for the E20 and E30 target. Ethanol blend to partly decarbonize diesel is also being adopted, creating a sizable additional demand. Ethanol is also the basic and main feedstock for SAF and renewable diesel via ATJ pathway. There is scope for over 50 large bio-refineries (1000-1500 KLPD standard size in the USA and EU) to reach the E30 programme and meeting diesel and SAF demand. To reach the Government's target of E30 by 2030, we would need 18 million tons of ethanol for blending in gasoline and more ethanol if 5 per cent blending in diesel and SAF production is adopted. The current production is around 4 million tons, leaving a wide gap. India's gasoline consumption would reach 60 million tons/year by 2030. Biofuels alone will not replace other energy sources but will have a major role. Being high-octane and clean burning, they would cut down PM2.5 emissions and pollution in India's major cities by making gasoline and diesel more clean burning.

Over 800 biomass power projects have been installed with a combined capacity of 10,632 MW for power generation and 140 tons/day for compressed biogas production. The country is also developing a market for bio-products like biomass pellets. Government initiatives, with a mandate for a minimum 5 per cent utilization of biomass in thermal power plants, and the STAT scheme, which promotes the use of CBG in transportation, along with amendments to the National Policy on Biofuels in 2018, contribute to this growth. The national policy on bio-fuels now allows a wider range of feedstock for biofuel production with immediate aims for a 20 per cent blending of ethanol in petrol by 2025-26. The 2023 Indian budget proposed the establishment of 500 new waste-to-wealth plants under the Govardhan Scheme, including 200 CBG plants. The focus is on diversifying to advance feedstock to minimize land use for price and other environmental factors. Technologies like cellulosic ethanol and biomass waste Fischer-Tropsch are being developed to expand non-food crop biofuel production. But there are challenges. \* The government's plan recognizes feedstock availability as the first challenge for ethanol-blended fuel. There is an urgent need for second[1] generation feedstock from non-food sources, such as cellulose. Also, the maize route for ethanol production needs to be accelerated. \* Bioenergy growth needs consistent government policies. \* Only a few states in India, like UP, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, and Haryana, are major agricultural producers. In view of this, extensive infrastructure is needed for the storage, transportation, and distribution of ethanol throughout the country. \* Modifying petrol pumps to use E20 at all locations throughout the country.

Bioenergy systems exemplify circular economy principles by efficiently utilizing organic waste streams like agricultural residues and forestry waste for renewable energy production, minimizing waste generation, conserving resources, mitigating pollution, and fostering sustainable production and consumption patterns. Bioenergy emerges as a transformative agent poised to reshape India's socio-economic landscape.

Green Sailing

In the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bold pledge for India to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2070, the country is setting sail on a transformative journey toward green shipping. The recent announcement by the shipping secretary, T. K. Ramachandran, signals a commitment to convert the entirety of coastal and inland waterways transportation to renewable energy within the next five years. This ambitious initiative not only resonates with the global push for environmental sustainability but also signifies India's determination to lead the charge in reducing the waterway transport industry's carbon footprint. As the world grapples with climate change, the shipping sector has emerged as a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for about 3 per cent of global CO2 output. India's commitment to achieving sustainability in this domain not only aligns with broader international goals but also positions the nation as a key player in addressing environmental challenges. The current state of India's renewable energy adoption in major ports, estimated at less than 10 per cent, underscores the urgency of this green transition. However, the proactive approach, including the addition of 5,000 new vessels over the next decade and the launch of the first Indian-made hydrogen-run ferry, showcases a clear intent to accelerate the pace of change. Warship maker Garden Reach Shipbuilders and Engineers' plans to develop green energy vessels utilising solar power and batteries further exemplify the innovative spirit driving this transformation. The introduction of the Maritime Development Fund is a noteworthy stride in supporting the industry's shift towards sustainability. By fostering the development of green vessels and ports, India aims not only to reduce its carbon footprint but also to bolster its shipping and inland water transport sector. This strategic investment not only serves national interests but also aligns with global initiatives to adhere to the International Maritime Organisation's target of reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions from ships by 50 per cent by 2050. A particularly promising aspect of India's green shipping vision is the plan to establish green hydrogen hubs at strategic ports like Kandla, Thoothukudi, and Paradip. Green hydrogen, produced through renewable energy sources, holds immense potential as a clean fuel for the maritime industry. India's ambitious target of producing 5 million metric tons of green hydrogen annually by 2030 signifies a broader commitment to fostering a sustainable energy ecosystem. The envisioned shift to green shipping is not merely an environmental gesture but a strategic economic move. India, as Asia's third-largest economy, recognises the importance of fostering a sustainable and resilient shipping industry. The Maritime Development Fund, coupled with the deployment of green energy vessels, positions the country to become a hub for eco-friendly maritime activities. As the nation navigates these uncharted waters, it sets a compelling example for others to follow. The journey towards green inland water transport is not just a voyage for India but a collective endeavour towards a cleaner, more sustainable maritime future.

Back to the wall

In the war-torn land of Ukraine, the grim reality of a protracted and stagnant conflict comes to the forefront. Two years into Russia's full-scale invasion, the front lines have become entrenched, prompting speculation about the effectiveness of Ukraine's resistance and the geopolitical implications of a seemingly endless war. In the early stages of the conflict, Ukraine, fuelled by Western support and advanced weaponry, staged impressive counter-offensives, liberating over half of the territory seized by Russia since February 2022. However, the tides have turned, and progress has ground to a halt. The recent reshuffling of Ukraine's armed forces leadership speaks volumes about President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's frustration with the lack of momentum, hinting at the internal challenges faced by the Ukrainian military. A critical factor in this quagmire is the shifting dynamics of international aid. Data from a German think-tank reveals that European aid, although outpacing American assistance in near-term delivery, falls short in supplying crucial military equipment. The European Union's admission that only half of the promised 1 million artillery shells will be delivered raises concerns about the bloc's commitment to Ukraine's defence. Meanwhile, Russia's growing advantage in artillery firepower, coupled with the influx of ammunition from unexpected sources like North Korea, tilts the balance in its favour. The war tracker's depiction of heavy fighting along the eastern and southern fronts, especially the capture of Avdiivka, underscores the toll on Ukraine's forces. A major in Ukraine's armed forces admitted that with more equipment and ammunition, the battle might have had a different outcome. This setback raises questions about Ukraine's ability to hold its ground against an increasingly formidable adversary. Despite these challenges, Ukraine has found success at sea, inflicting significant damage on Russia in the Black Sea. The destruction of 25 surface ships and one submarine, along with the sinking of another valuable vessel, has established a strategic corridor for essential exports. This maritime success serves as a glimmer of hope, showcasing Ukraine's resilience and adaptability even in the face of adversity. Economically, Ukraine's ability to maintain its grain and other exports via this strategic corridor is commendable. Exports of grain, oilseeds, and vegetable oils in January exceeded levels from previous years, illustrating a degree of economic buoyancy amid the chaos of war. However, the underlying question remains. How long can Ukraine sustain this economic momentum without substantial territorial gains on land? The Ukraine-Russia war has morphed into a complex and protracted conflict with no immediate resolution in sight. While Ukraine's naval successes and economic resilience are commendable, the stalemate on the ground demands a re-evaluation of international support. The wavering commitment of key allies and the relentless advancement of Russia underscore the urgency for a cohesive and robust strategy to ensure Ukraine's territorial integrity and long-term stability. As the war inches into its third year, the world watches a conflict that defies easy resolution.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR editor@thestatesman.com

At what cost?

SIR, Yesterday, 10 March, a mammoth rally was organised by the ruling TMC at Brigade Parade ground. From the previous evening, buses went off the roads and streets were a deserted look. On the day of the rally, rickshaws, autos, buses and even cabs were not seen on the road. Though it was a Sunday, people were seen waiting at bus stands for long periods. Only the metro plied normally and every rake was packed to capacity. Rickshawallas, auto drivers, hawkers and daily wage earners

are forced to attend these rallies abandoning their duties. No political party pays for their revenue loss. On the other hand these poor people belonging to the unorganised sector have no paid leave, no medical facility and obviously no PF or ESI, leave alone pension. Still they are made to join processions, fill up the ground and cheer for the political leaders. In return, they get nothing. An almost similar picture is observed during strikes called by political parties. In the 34 years of Left mis-



rule, our state witnessed innumerable strikes. During such strikes, small business establishments and transport services were shut down. In sheer frustration and anguish, most of these people have either migrated to other states for better livelihood, or have died in hunger or have accepted such state sponsored hooliganism. I would like to appeal to all political parties through this esteemed daily not to play with the sentiments of people belonging to the unorganised sector and identify other ways to fulfill their political agenda. Yours, etc., Purushottam Chatterjee, Kolkata, 11 March.



CONTRAPUNTO

He who knows does not speak.  
He who speaks does not know

-LAO TZU

# One Nation, Many Poles

Simultaneous polls are a good idea. But given multipolar polity, get more parties on board

A high-level committee led by Ram Nath Kovind, tasked to examine the feasibility of simultaneous elections for all levels of govt, has recommended India transition to this system. This can happen by 2029. Synchronising LS and assembly elections doesn't face a stiff challenge as the relevant constitutional change will not require ratification by state assemblies. However, synchronising local body elections and electoral rolls will need the concurrence of at least half the state assemblies.

India started off with simultaneous elections. That was the general case till about 1967. Subsequently, election cycles diverged. Of the Kovind committee's arguments, let's start with the most convincing one to revert to synchronised elections.

**Limits administrative burden** | A typical LS election involves at least 7 million officials seconded to election duty. Schools are used as polling booths and there's large deployment of paramilitary forces. The same process, though on a smaller scale, is repeated for assembly elections. Synchronisation allows for more efficient use of resources.



**Impact on economic performance** | Kovind committee's study on the likely economic benefits of simultaneous elections is unconvincing. Economic growth is a complex process. Therefore, distilling its drivers to narrow dimensions such as election cycles is not persuasive. Moreover, data shows that India's high growth phase began in 1980s, long after the election cycle turned asynchronous.

**Uncertain areas** | Some of the other aspects cited in favour of simultaneous elections are hard to judge. For example, will descent into a danger zone of identity politics really be checked by it? To illustrate, reservation agitations and related political positioning are not always linked to an imminent election.

**Lack of unanimity** | As many as 47 political parties gave their opinion. Of them, 15 parties, or almost one in three, opposed the idea of simultaneous election. This is important as state assemblies will have to pay the price of synchronisation. Kovind committee wants synchronisation to be linked to the term of LS. According to the committee, this can be brought about without the concurrence of states.

**GST example** | GST is a highlight of India's political journey as states voluntarily surrendered unilateral taxation powers for a larger cause. It required years of work across two central govts to get their support. Persuasion is a virtue in a democracy.

Simultaneous elections will cause a disruptive change. That's not a problem if more political stakeholders support it before GOI takes the next step.

# Cracking The Code

India has finally played itself into the semicon game. Now keep at it to master chip tech

Modi's laying of the foundation stone for three semiconductor plants this week, gives India's chip-making dreams a shot in the arm. Crucially, one of the three units will be India's first commercial chip fab in Gujarat's Dholera. That's a great move.

**Learning by doing** | The Dholera fab is expected to churn out 28nm chips by end 2026. That's not earth-shattering. The most advanced chips in the market today are 3nm. Both Taiwan's TSMC and South Korea's Samsung also plan to move to 2nm production. But what's vital for India right now is to get the basics right and create a semicon ecosystem. Chip plants need stable power supply, energy-grade silicon, millions of gallons of water per day and hi-tech talent. These can't be conjured overnight. So semicon testing, assembly and packaging plants, like the ones being set up in Gujarat's Sanand and Assam's Morigaon, too help in creating required supply chains.

**Chip wars** | All of this is partly being driven by a desire among Western democracies to diversify away tech supply chains from China—a China+1 strategy. But this field is crowded with Vietnam, Thailand, Philippines etc also in play. So it will ultimately boil down to tech resources.

**Talent tonic** | India doesn't have a dearth of talent here with around 20% top global talent in chip design. But they work for foreign companies. Harnessing this talent for Indian companies making Indian chips is the business trick.

**It's geopolitics baby** | Semicon tech is constantly evolving. TSMC holds 90% market share in advanced chips. Taiwanese collab (like at Dholera) for chip-making in India is welcome but don't expect hi-tech transfers – Taiwan's semicon industry is a shield against potential Chinese attack. So India needs to put in the legwork and build its own capabilities if it's to emerge as a key global chip hub.

# Election tourism

India's Dance of Democracy could prove a money-spinning attraction, drawing overseas tourists

Jug Suraiya



Freedom, which is another word for democracy, is deemed to be invaluable, and ought not to have a price tag put on it.

Such reservations notwithstanding, the upcoming Lok Sabha elections are reportedly going to be the most costly and the biggest, in the history of democracy, involving some 960 million voters, and 62 political parties contesting 543 seats.

But even as this epic exercise makes for a government of the people, for the people and by the people, can it also, as the cherry on top of the cake of democracy, become a profit-making enterprise by monetising it and turning it into a tourist attraction?

India offers many kinds of tourism. There's Taj Mahal tourism, and wildlife tourism, and medical tourism, and village-stay tourism, and Himalayan trekking tourism, and pilgrimage tourism, and yoga tourism, and now temple and spiritual tourism. So why not election tourism?

Visitors from the world over could have a ringside view of the planet's biggest democracy in action as it exercises its franchise.

The rousing rhetoric and the thronging rallies of the campaign trail, the to-ings and fro-ings of Aya Rams and Gaya Rams, the horse trading that has nothing to do with four-legged livestock, the allegations and counter-allegations of rigging and booth-capturing.

With the election schedule announced by EC and the model code of conduct kicking in, some of this tamasha will be curtailed.

However, there's still the hubbub and hullabaloo of exit polls, and full-blast TV sets featuring astrologers disguised as political pundits, and political pundits in the guise of astrologers, predicting who's in and who's out, and reports of truckloads full of booze and boodle nabbed by cops, and the long queues outside polling booths, and on-the-spot interviews with the youngest voter, 18 years and 0 days, and the oldest, 92 and going strong.

And the ballot-caster proudly displaying her finger bearing the mark of democracy, showing that Incredible India is also Indelible India!

jugularvein

# 'M' Means 'Minimum'

Farmers gathered in Delhi yesterday, again demanding legally guaranteed MSP. A law per se isn't a problem. Problem is farmers' definition of a good price

C Rangarajan & S Mahendra Dev



Farmers mostly from states around Delhi held a mahapanchayat in the capital yesterday to put forth their demands on changes they want in agricultural policy. The core demand is about Minimum Support Price (MSP), the manner in which it's fixed and a legal backing for it.

**Cereals are unique** | What we have done with respect to wheat and rice cannot be replicated. A huge marketing structure, including storage facilities, will have to be built. There are alternative ways like limited procurement where private market will continue to have a role so that the two together will stabilise market price at MSP. As of now, besides wheat and rice, there are 21 other crops, including some commercial crops, for which MSPs are officially announced. But there

**How MSP works** | Presently, the government provides MSP that is equal to 50% above A2+FL. Farmers want MSP to be fixed at 50% above C2. C2 cost is 31% higher than A2+FL for paddy in 2023-24.

In the case of wheat, C2 cost over A2+FL is 46%. A very high margin of 50% over C2 cost will result in GOI becoming the only procurer. Such a situation would become unsustainable.

**Economics of MSP demand** | When output increases well beyond the market demand at a price remunerative to producers, market prices decline. Therefore, in the absence of an effective price support policy, farmers are faced with a loss of income, depending on how much the price decline is. The farm distress has been partly on account of this situation, as the loss of income is beyond the ability of the small farmers to absorb.

**Legal guarantee possible** | MSP scheme has been in existence for several decades and it is particularly effective for rice and wheat crops. The legal guarantee for MSP can be introduced. But, there are a few issues that need to be clarified before launching.

**Twin benefits of PDS** | In the case of wheat and rice, the prescription of MSP has been combined with total procurement of all the grains offered at that price and a public distribution system through which the procured grains are distributed.

Thus, it combines protection to producers with protection to consumers. PDS sale price is far less than the price at which the cereals are procured resulting in a huge subsidy to be borne by central govt. According to GOI's budget, food subsidies this fiscal will amount to a little over ₹2L cr.

**Defining legal MSP** | In this context, two questions arise. First, do we need to extend such a scheme to all crops? Second, in the context of a legalised MSP, which means that nobody can buy at a price lower than MSP, what should be the precise interpretation? We need to mark a distinction between

'remunerative price' and MSP.

economic cost of growing a crop.



is procurement only in some years.

**Let's talk about costs** | In fixing MSP, we need to consider three types of costs.

• A2: It represents the costs actually incurred by farmers.

• A2+FL: To the cost actually incurred by farmers, GOI assumes a value for the work a farmer's family puts in during a crop cycle.

• C2: C2 is truly comprehensive. It takes A2+FL and adds on an assumed value for interest on the fixed capital used in agricultural operations together with rental value of a farmer's own land. C2 represents the

**How to work out legal MSP** | A legally binding MSP must have only a small margin of say 10%, if C2 is considered. It should take care of the price uncertainty induced by the markets. Otherwise, we are distorting the words 'minimum' and 'support'.

**Don't forget interstate differences** | MSP is fixed based on the weighted average cost for all India. However, the cost of production varies across states. The projected A2+FL cost of production for paddy was lowest at ₹864 per quintal in Punjab due to higher yield as compared to all-India cost of ₹1,455 per quintal.

Among top five producers of paddy in the country, which accounted for 52.5% production share of projected states during 2021-22, Punjab has the lowest A2+FL cost of production, while West Bengal has the highest cost of production at ₹1,766 per quintal.

**Productivity matters** | For the high-cost and low-yield states, legal MSP alone may not help. These states should reduce cost of cultivation and increase yields in order to have higher profit margins over costs. The institutional arrangements to ensure fair and competitive markets are also essential for MSP to play its role in providing a protective price environment for the farmers.

In conclusion, the real issue is not giving legal status to MSP. It can be done. But the most important question is how we conceive the concepts 'minimum' and 'support' in MSP. The MS Swaminathan Commission recommendation of C2+50% needs some modification.

Rangarajan is former governor, RBL. Dev is former chairman, Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices

# The Why And The How Of One Nation, One Election

A short explainer on the Kovind committee's big recommendations

**No more always-on campaigning** | The report says "frequent elections create...uncertainty...slow down government machinery." That "when elections are held repeatedly, then quite often half the time of 5 years is spent in electioneering." This can't be argued against. Plus, since almost every party has only a few star campaigners, simultaneous polls spare them from always being in campaign mode. In theory, at least, this means more time for governance.

**The big changes** | Two key constitutional amendments are suggested – to alter the duration of state legislatures and to alter the duration of municipalities and panchayats. The first needs only parliamentary ratification, the report says, and the second will need states' ratification.

**What will happen in practice?** | If a state govt falls midway through its 5-year term, there are 2 scenarios. One, new govt can be formed minus fresh polls. That govt's term will end when the next round of ONOE is due. Two, no govt can be formed. This means either fresh state polls or central rule. The report says it's for EC to decide what should happen. Even a newly elected govt's term will end when ONOE is due.

**Logistics of it** | Implementation will be a task. Simultaneous elections will face the biggest challenges in troops deployment and procurement of EVMS. One suggestion during consultations was to have paper ballots in rural areas till EVM manufacturing is buttressed to meet the demand.

**Single electoral roll** | The report says that "the committee found mostly electoral rolls are prepared by state election commissions after taking them from CEC...At times, these...lead to duplication...errors." As part of its digitisation projects, EC already has a 'unified voter roll', UNPER.

A single electoral roll for all levels of government – LS, states and municipalities/panchayats – is certainly required. Most states have separate rolls for panchayat

elections. The report recommends constitutional amendments to enable a single electoral roll and Single Elector's Photo Identity Card (EPIC) across elections. It says, "ECI shall make electoral roll...in consultation with state election commission(s)." Such an electoral roll and EPIC card will "substitute any electoral roll and EPIC prepared earlier".



States need to ratify this, which will make EC the final arbiter on electoral rolls.

**New ways to think about poll impact** | There's plenty of data in the report on the impact of frequent polls on key numbers – GDP growth, govt deficit, inflation, primary school enrolment. Pundits will, of course, debate the analysis. But the good thing is that the committee has opened new ways to think and talk about polls. Cue for economists to do new, useful research.

**Too many polls, too much disruption** | Through the report, and from those consulted, the argument is made repeatedly that frequent elections take up too much time of administration and security personnel. The report at the outset says, "Political parties and their leaders, businesses, workers, academia, governments and all conscientious voters have highlighted the bane of frequent and intermittent elections." It talks of "lost days", of "disruptions caused to normal life", of the model code of conduct causing "policy paralysis and governance deficit". One body consulted noted that the holding of political rallies disrupts road traffic and leads to noise pollution.

**Voter fatigue and turnout** | The report says simultaneous elections will reduce "voter fatigue" and improve turnout. It argues ONOE will make more voters exercise their franchise because they only need to do so twice every five years, at set dates. To support its argument on higher turnout, the report cites voter turnout from some states that have had simultaneous state and LS polls.

**Nod to migrants' plight** | Report explicitly recognises the issue of migrant votes. Migrants often can't afford to go home to vote, many other studies show. The committee says when migrants go home to vote, in the current scenario, they do it multiple times for multiple polls. Synchronised polls mean migrants go once, which the report says, "is better for productivity". In the report's two-step simultaneous poll schedule, step 2 elections (municipalities/panchayats) must be held within 100 days of step 1 (Lok Sabha, state assemblies polls). So, migrants' poll participation will still partly depend on poll schedules.

**Comment on first past the post system?** | The report says, "Sometimes, the electoral process based on first past the post system of elections fails to provide stable majorities." It says this in the context of hung houses. But it doesn't go further on this point.

Analysis: Nandita Sengupta

# Calvin & Hobbes



# Sacredspace

Sin of the mind, depart far away! Why do you utter improper suggestions? Depart from this place! I do not want you. Go to the trees and the forests. My mind will remain here along with our home and our cattle.

Atharva Ved

# Cut Down The Tree Of Sansar And Be Free

**Swami Bhaktivenkateshvara**  
Advaita Vedanta states that we only suffer in life because we are bound by sansar. By being caught in the transmigration of karmas, we remain ignorant of God as our True Self within. How is it possible that we experience a life of limitations and sorrow when in truth we are God? In verse 145 of Vivekachudamani, Adi Shankaracharya describes how sansar comes to exist by asking us to imagine a tree: "Ignorance is the seed for the tree of sansar. Body-identification is the sprout, desires are its tender leaves, work its water; body its trunk, pranas are its branches, the sense organs its twigs, the sense objects its flowers, different miseries born out of the varieties of actions are the fruits, and the individual jiva is the bird

perched on top of it." Any tree manifests itself through a seed and it is this seed of ignorance that causes sansar. But ignorance of what exactly? Of forgetting that we are God and there is only Brahman. We then become identified with the Anatman as everything which is not God: a physical body which creates our waking state, a subtle body that as the mind plays itself out in dreams and the causal body that exists due to vasanas. Such sprouts produce desires within us. Why? Because the body needs food to survive, the mind plays out its impressions in the waking and dream states and finally, the causal body needs to fulfil previous karmas. Just as any tree, the physical body grows into adulthood giving the tree of

sansar its deep grounding in Avidya. Its branches are made up of the five pranas that control its physiological functions. In order to become a fully egocentric agent in the world of Maya as pluralistic matter, the body starts transacting within duality through the sense organs and their respective objects. For example, the eyes perceive a world outside oneself, which is taken to be the only reality, "I see this world and in order to live, I need and want this." We then run after sense objects seeking happiness in them, forgetting that in reality they don't exist but are a construct of the mind. However, it is already at this point that the fall into sansar cannot be stopped: By comparing the flux of our actions with water, Adi Shankara places

the main culprit within sansar on selfish actions and their endless, unfulfilling results. We have become bound by the fruits of our doership and enjoyership. The fall from Brahman as the Supreme Reality into a separate jiva in life is complete. Through his tree simile, Adi Shankara shows us that while we live in this world of relativity, we cannot stop Maya and sansar being a part of our individuality. But where we can gain control is by going within – by taking the standpoint of the eternal sakhshi as the Inner Witness to all – by affirming "I am God, never these thoughts and experiences." We suffer in life because we identify with an external world which is only relatively real. Therefore, cut down the tree of sansar by taking the position of the Observer and you will have gained an independent, inner freedom which defies words.





## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Simultaneous polls

Panel report should spur Centre to build consensus

WITH the Lok Sabha elections set to be announced anytime now, a committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind has submitted its report on 'One nation, one election'. The panel has recommended a two-phase exercise: first, hold simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and state assemblies; second, conduct elections to municipalities and panchayats within 100 days. It has also recommended a common electoral roll and electoral photo identity card for use in the elections to all three tiers of governance.

In its manifesto for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP had affirmed its commitment to the idea of simultaneous elections for Parliament, assemblies and local bodies to 'reduce expenditure, ensure efficient utilisation of government resources and security forces and for effective policy planning.' The party had promised that it would try to build consensus on this issue among various stakeholders. According to the committee, 47 political parties submitted their views and suggestions, out of which 32 supported simultaneous elections.

'One nation, one election' is arguably the final big item on its agenda that the BJP has addressed before the General Election. A common voter list is undoubtedly a sound idea that will find acceptance across the board, but the same is not true for simultaneous polls. Parliamentary and Assembly elections have different dynamics and issues at stake. For instance, the BJP swept all seats in the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi in 2014 and 2019; however, it was AAP that recorded landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 Assembly polls. Some Opposition parties and independent observers see 'One nation, one election' as a ploy to blur the lines and prompt the electorate to vote for the ruling party at the Centre in both cases. Armed with the panel report, the Centre must go all out to develop unanimity on this contentious matter.

## Paper for cash

Take action under stringent public exam law

THE leaking of the UP police exam paper to over 1,500 candidates at a farmhouse in Gurugram is a glaring indictment of systemic corruption that undermines the integrity of our public institutions. This brazen act — where aspiring cops were herded into buses, taken to a resort and handed over the paper for Rs 7 lakh each — highlights the lengths to which unscrupulous elements go to subvert the rule of law and gain an unfair advantage. From Delhi Police constables to local accomplices, the web of corruption spans states, pointing to an organised racket involved in this despicable act.

Serving as yet another grim reminder of the rampant malpractices plaguing our system is the Haryana School Education Board paper leak, which came to the fore in Nuh district recently. The fact that even teachers, entrusted with the responsibility of upholding academic integrity, have been found complicit in leaking exam papers underscores the pervasiveness of this malaise. Such incidents not only erode public trust in the recruitment and educational institutions, they also deprive deserving candidates of a fair chance to succeed.

In this context, the recent enactment of the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, is a step in the right direction. By imposing stringent penalties, including imprisonment and hefty fines, on those found guilty of exam paper leaks, the new law sends out a strong message that such nefarious activities will not be tolerated. Effective enforcement of the law is imperative to root out corruption from our examination system. This requires collaborative efforts from law enforcement agencies, recruiters, educational institutions and policymakers to devise robust mechanisms for conducting all types of exams with integrity and transparency. Exemplary action must be taken against the culprits in the UP exam case under the new law.

## ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MARCH 15, 1924

## A USELESS INQUIRY

IF the object of the authorities in instituting an inquiry through Sardar Bahwant Singh, PCS, into the recent deplorable incident at Jaito was to satisfy the public of either the correctness of the official version of that incident or the justifiability of the official action, we have no hesitation in saying, after a careful perusal of the report of the inquiry, that in that object they have entirely failed. In the first place, a purely official inquiry by an officer of the government is the very last thing that can satisfy any reasonable person in a matter of this kind. Secondly, this particular inquiry appears, on the face of it, to have been of the usual white-washing kind. In every part of the report, there is a visible attempt not to say one word which might involve the slightest reflection upon any official, from the administrator downwards, who had anything to do with the affair. On most of the important points connected with or arising out of the affair, the report is, in fact, only an amplification of the official statement first made through a communiqué and subsequently repeated by the Home Member in the Assembly. Thirdly, the report throws little or no light on the points left obscure by the official statements. These were, first, how it was that, if the mob had firearms, not a single one of these arms could be captured by the police and the military. And secondly, how it happened, if there was so much firing on the side of the mob, that there was no casualty on the other side. On the first of these points, the report is entirely silent. On the second, all that it does is repeat the statement about a Nabha villager having received a shot.

## Giving the marginalised the gift of health

Many concerned citizens are keen to improve the quality of life of their unfortunate brothers &amp; sisters



TRYSTS AND TURNS  
JULIO RIBEIRO

LET us take a breather from the cut-throat world of politics in our beloved country and talk instead of the positive work done by extraordinary individuals that should light up our existence.

When I wrote about Dr Mahav Sathé's work with rural children, predominantly from the tribal community, I did so with the goal of getting our youth motivated to help the less privileged without seeking monetary or other rewards. There are many such individuals who work selflessly for society's marginalised without seeking recognition. But recognition has its own dimensions. It encourages those in a position to help those in need of help, thus making Indian society more compassionate and caring.

I wrote this article on International Women's Day. My daughter, Ana Saldanha, was honoured by the DY Patil College of Law in Navi Mumbai for her work with the youth. Justice Indira Banerjee, a former judge of the Supreme Court, presented her and four other women achievers with the award. Ana, very understandably, was thrilled. The smile on her face made me think: there are many concerned citizens who spend time and energy helping to improve the quality of life of their unfortunate brothers and sisters. Some have devoted their entire lives to such work.

Dr Armida Fernandez is one such exemplary citizen, a woman and a doctor, about whom I am writing with the hope that other citizens are inspired to emulate her com-



MISSION: The NGO founded by Dr Armida Fernandez addresses the problems of high neonatal and maternal mortality as well as violence against women and children. FILE PHOTO

mitment to society at large.

Ethics prompt me to make a personal disclosure: she is closely related to me. Her father, Prof Armando Menezes, a former Principal of Karnatak College, Dharwar, and later Rajaram College, Kolhapur, was my maternal grandmother's first cousin. More importantly, the relationship between our two families has been extremely close. I have known Armida since she was a baby. Her eldest sibling (she is the youngest of seven), George, was born a month before my birth. Another brother, Luis, was an IAS officer of the 1959 batch (Tamil Nadu cadre). He retired as a Secretary in the Government of India.

Armida was and is even today a leading neonatologist. She retired as the Dean of Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Hospital, Mumbai, also known as Sion Hospital. On retirement, she turned down numerous offers from private hospitals, preferring to found SNEHA (Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action), an NGO that addresses the twin problems of high neonatal and maternal

SNEHA's integrated approach seeks to break the inter-generational cycle of poor health, a major byproduct of poverty & deprivation.

mortality as well as violence against women and children, so common in Mumbai's sprawling slums where lack of space overshadows the joy of living.

Armida has done path-breaking work in breast-feeding, an interest she shared with my friend and co-trustee in the Public Concern for Governance Trust, Dr Raj Kumar Anand, a native of Punjab who is settled in Mumbai. It was Armida who founded Asia's first human milk bank in 1989.

The NGO she founded in 1999 has spread its wings from one slum to numerous slums across the city. Today, SNEHA covers informal settlements across 10 municipal corporations around Mumbai. After the death of her only child, Romila, to cancer, she and her husband, Dr Rui Fernandez, started the Romila Palliative Care Centre (RPCC) in 2017. The centre has reached out to over a thousand patients with life-limiting illnesses, providing them and their care-givers comfort and relief from suffering.

Good health enables people to build better lives. It is the foundation of a child's ability to learn. Armida believes that to bring about a change in the health status of the most vulnerable communities, preventive strategies are required. SNEHA has worked with slum-dwellers to improve maternal and newborn health, child health and nutrition, sexual and reproductive health of adolescents, and also addressed gender-based violence against women and children, incidentally a problem that is not unknown even in the affluent sections of

urban society.

Over the past 25 years, SNEHA has reached out to a beneficiary base of over 2,50,000 through a combination of interventions and succeeded in decreasing stunting in children below two years by 27 per cent and maternal anaemia by 23 per cent. Over 50,000 women who had experienced violence have been helped with services and counselling. Over 5,000 healthcare workers, police personnel and lawyers have attended training sessions organised by SNEHA.

SNEHA's integrated life cycle approach seeks to break the inter-generational cycle of poor health, a major byproduct of poverty and deprivation. Its life cycle approach intervenes at critical junctures — adolescence, pregnancy, childbirth, post-partum and early childhood — to bring about improvements in the health and nutrition of communities living on the margins of a megapolis.

SNEHA uses a two-pronged strategy across its programmes. It partners with vulnerable communities to improve health-seeking behaviour and awareness of health services. It works extensively with public health systems and healthcare providers to improve service delivery through training, capacity-building and advocacy.

Her model has succeeded, and that encouraged Armida to turn her attention to the RPCC. Since she had trained and mentored several young people in whose abilities and commitment she placed total confidence, she was able to entrust the management of SNEHA to them, continuing as the non-executive president and mentor of that now well-known organisation.

It has been a labour of love and mercy conducted over 25 years. Armida is in her eighties now. Her husband, a dermatologist of integrity and renown, died some months ago. She now soldiers on in the RPCC.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Be kind and merciful. Let no one ever come to you without coming away better and happier. — Mother Teresa

## The cat and the milkman

SYED NOORUZZAMAN

AS I would enter the premises of an NGO for a walk every morning this winter, I would witness an unusual scene. Even when it was very cold, with visibility being poor amid a thick blanket of fog, she was there. Sometimes, when I forgot to glance at her, she would gently remind me with a 'meow'. She would repeat 'meow, meow' as I stood there to observe how she reacted when the person she had been waiting for arrived.

Seated on a wall with her milk pot in front of her, she would simply utter 'meow, meow' when the milkman was there in front of her. Smilingly, he would fill her pot with milk every morning and disappear quietly. This had become part of his routine and he followed it religiously. What was even more amazing was that the brown-coloured creature would be there on the wall well before the arrival of the milkman. Obviously, she had a great sense of time without taking the help of a watch.

There were occasions when the plastic pot was missing. The milkman told me that this was the work of naughty youngsters. They would take away the pot to make it tough for him to feed the cat.

The first time this happened, it disturbed the man, who has grown old supplying milk to customers in our area. After doing his primary job, he rushed on his scooter to a nearby shop, which opens early in the morning, to purchase a new plastic container to feed the waiting cat. He could not live in peace without accomplishing this noble task.

The milkman became wiser after he first found that the cat's pot was missing. He now always keeps an additional pot in the boot of his scooter so that the cat did not have to suffer if it was not there. This demonstrates his commitment to feeding the hungry feline.

One morning, as I passed through the area, I found the milkman terribly upset. Asked the reason, he told me that the cat had been missing for a few days. As he was frantically looking for her here and there, an old man told him that she was in his house, recovering after confinement.

The bearded old man knew me too. He informed me that the cat had given birth to stillborn kittens. This had caused a great deal of distress in his house. The children were upset when they saw the cat weeping copiously. They prayed for her early recovery and arranged a decent burial for the dead kittens.

After a few days, the milkman noticed that the cat was there on the wall again, waiting for her feed. His happiness knew no bounds, and he quickly gave milk to the animal in a new pot he had kept in his scooter. And so the fascinating affair continued.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Old warhorses in the fray

Apropos of the editorial 'Biden vs Trump'; the 2024 US presidential election reflects the global trend of old warhorses taking the field. Even here in India, there are many seasoned politicians who are always in the fray. It does not augur well for democracy, as it shows a lack of younger leaders capable of taking charge. It has got to the point where democratic elections fail to serve the voters, who just get a Hobson's choice. Even though around one in five Americans has an unfavourable impression of the current and the former President, this group will have to make a choice between the two.

DV SHARMA, MUKERIAN

## World wary of a Trump win

With reference to 'Biden vs Trump'; the US election has always been closely watched by the rest of the world because of the implications of the outcome for global politics and economics. President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, are set for a rematch. A Trump re-election could mean a continuation of protectionist policies, volatile foreign relations and unpredictable economic decisions, whereas a second term of the Biden presidency will have to deliver on the promises of fostering multilateralism and a more collaborative approach to global issues. The choice between these two paths will shape the future of international politics, setting the tone for global cooperation in the years to come.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

## Trump's rhetoric

Refer to 'Biden vs Trump'; the US presidential poll this year is set to be a bitter slugfest between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. As a business tycoon with wealthy lobbyists behind him, Trump might double down on his 'America First' stance. It is the kind of rhetoric that leads to a rise in racist attacks on Black people. Immigrants are the backbone of the American economy, and Trump must not label them 'job snatchers'. He must desist from banking on hatred and hypernationalism to attract voters this time.

HL SHARMA, AMRITSAR

## Govt must uphold secularism

Apropos of 'CAA rollout'; the announcement of the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which is perceived by many as discriminatory, has stirred unrest and fear among members of India's Muslim community. The timing, merely weeks before the General Election, raises questions about the intent behind this move. While the government may claim that the Act is aimed at uplifting persecuted minorities, the exclusion of Muslims is alarming. It is imperative that the government uphold the secular and inclusive values enshrined in our Constitution, ensuring equality for all citizens, regardless of their religion.

GURDEV SINGH, MOHALI

## Cong can't buy women's votes

With reference to the report 'Congress vows ₹1L cash, 50% job quota for women'; in a bid to secure more votes in the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress is now reaching out to women. The five guarantees announced by the party for women, including an annual direct cash transfer of Rs 1 lakh to one woman from every poor family and a 50 per cent quota for females for jobs in the Central Government, are a reflection on the Congress' low opinion of the weaker sex. The party thinks that women can be lured easily with such incentives. The party needs to realise that women across urban and rural areas in the country these days are educated and aware of their rights. Their votes cannot be bought.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI

## Dialogue must for world peace

Refer to the report 'Will use nukes if Russia threatened, warns Putin'; Russian President Vladimir Putin has issued a stark warning, conveying his readiness to employ nuclear weapons if the sovereignty of Russia is threatened. Amid conflicts like the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas wars, China's threats to Taiwan and tensions between North Korea and South Korea, global stability seems distant. US President Joe Biden, a seasoned politician, must comprehend the perils of further escalation. All world leaders must understand the importance of promoting dialogue over aggression. In view of Moscow's formidable nuclear capabilities, preserving peace becomes imperative.

VUJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

The implementation of the CAA rules has renewed concerns about the exclusion of certain minority groups

Pick-and-choose policy



SANJOY HAZARIKA AUTHOR AND COLUMNIST

THE Centre has announced a 39-page set of rules that gives muscle and teeth to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019. Coming as it does a few weeks before the Lok Sabha elections, the development has stirred controversy, with Opposition leaders accusing the ruling dispensation at the Centre of seeking to polarise the electorate.

The Bharatiya Janata Party says it has fulfilled another electoral promise and notes that fears about the CAA being used to deprive people of citizenship are just unfounded apprehensions.

The core aim of the Act is to provide citizenship to those from six religions — minorities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh — who have fled persecution and settled illegally or informally in India.

Although anti-CAA protests are taking place in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and other parts of the country, these appear sporadic and muted compared to the storm that swept across India in 2019-20, resulting in numerous deaths and widespread arrests.

Despite the demonstrations, there is a larger issue at stake — the Supreme Court is yet to hear and rule on a slew of legal challenges to the CAA, essentially contesting its constitutionality. The key argument has been that by instituting religion as a marker of citizenship, the CAA violates the basic premises of the Constitution, which prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees all people equality before the law and equal protection of the law.

There are points, often overlooked, that reinforce the complexities of the core issues. First, the situation in Assam was complicated by the rollout of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2019, for which 1.9 million applicants did not make the cut.

demanding a revision. Yet, nearly five years down the line, those off the NRC list have not been able to file objections and seek their reinstatement under the law. In addition, a large number of people have had their Aadhaar cards frozen, and the state government is making special facilities to enable them to access basic services available under national and state schemes.

Second, the list of communities that are to receive succour appears incomplete. It does not include groups like the Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and Christians, over 90,000 of whom are refugees in this country, or the Chin Christians from Myanmar (over 45,000 are in Mizoram alone).

Belonging to one religion does not reduce the risk of persecution for minority groups, even within that religion. But the CAA did not find the need to provide protection for vulnerable Muslim groups, such as the Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan and the Hazaras in Afghanistan. The Centre has taken sporadic action against the Rohingyas of Myanmar, much to the concern of UN agencies, which see this group as among the most persecuted communities in the world.

The CAA will not be applied across India uniformly. It will not be implemented in parts of the North East: the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram and three tribal-

The Tribune DEBATE CITIZENSHIP AMENDMENT ACT

Secularism at stake



VIKAS SINGH SENIOR ADVOCATE, SUPREME COURT

WHEN India gained Independence after a hard-fought struggle, our founding fathers and mothers envisioned it as a secular country that would be a haven for people of all religions. The Partition saw an exodus of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan and East Bengal (later East Pakistan and now Bangladesh), who came to India in search of a new life and were welcomed with open arms.

The Citizenship Act, 1955, in its original form, prescribed that anyone born in the country after January 26, 1950,

citizens of India from the date of their entry into India. Qualifications for naturalisation of such persons have also been relaxed. The person is required to have been residing in India or in government service in the country for not less than five of the preceding 14 years. For persons not falling in this group, the time period for residence in India or government service is not less than 11 of the preceding 14 years.

While the stated humanitarian objective is laudable, it begs the question — why have people from other religions and those facing religious persecution in other neighbouring countries been left out? India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. This is understandable, given our large population and limited economic resources.

I represented the Assam Advocates Association in the challenge to the CAA in the Supreme Court. States from the North East face a greater burden upon the CAA's implementation and illegal migration from porous borders, which has been a burning political issue for decades. The Assam Accord of 1985, which led to the insertion of Section 6A in the Citizenship Act, established a cut-off date of March 24, 1971. No illegal migrant entering Assam after this date would be given Indian citizenship.

We must bear in mind that it has been almost 77 years since India gained Independence, and we have stepped into the modern era. We must no longer allow ourselves to be governed by the invisible scars left by the Partition. India was formed on the premise of being a multi-cultural, secular democracy.

Belonging to one religion does not reduce the risk of pressure and persecution for minority groups, even within that religion.

The religious classification as well as the omission of other neighbouring countries from the CAA cast doubts on the secular credentials of the country.



TICKING BOMB: Although anti-CAA protests are taking place in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and other parts of the country, these appear sporadic and muted compared to the storm that swept across India in 2019-20. However, the objections may escalate in the coming weeks. ANI

dominated areas of Assam (with small populations) and Tripura, which have special constitutional protection. In geographical terms, this means that almost half of the region is excluded from the CAA's purview, although in terms of population, it is much less, considering Assam's numbers.

Yet, given the purported scale of the citizenship issue, few hard facts have been provided about the number of illegal migrants living in India. The Ministry of Home Affairs declared in an affidavit to the Supreme Court last December, without giving numbers, that "illegal migrants enter the country without valid travel documents. The detection, detention and deportation of such illegally staying foreign nationals involve a complex ongoing process."

While it is important to continue to be vigilant and press for constitutional approaches to the CAA and the NRC, there are other priorities and concerns that demand our attention.

In the distant, quiet Mizoram, where the CAA will not prevail, there is greater anxiety about another issue — the proclaimed building of a fence along the 1,643-km-long Indo-Myanmar border and the repeal of the Free Movement Regime that will divide communities from each other, another way of restricting citizens and travel. These are also national security challenges that need to be addressed.

QUICK CROSSWORD puzzle with grid and clues for Across and Down words.

SU DO KU puzzle grid and CALENDAR for March 15, 2024, Friday.

FORECAST table showing weather predictions for various cities like Chandigarh, New Delhi, Amritsar, etc.