

Rules of the game

Exceptions for PSEs should be avoided

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India on Wednesday informed stock exchanges the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) had given it a three-year extension to comply with the mandatory 10 per cent public-shareholding norm. It can now attain the mandatory 10 per cent public float by May 16, 2027. Firms with a market capitalisation above ₹1 trillion are expected to attain 25 per cent public shareholding in five years. However, in the case of LIC, it has already been extended to 10 years. While the LIC stock reacted positively to the extension announcement, it should have been avoided. Such regulatory forbearance affects the credibility of institutions in the market.

One of the big weaknesses of the Indian policy establishment in the post-reform period has been its inability to sustain even good initiatives. The disinvestment programme is one such example. The basic idea was stake sale or outright privatisation of public-sector enterprises (PSEs) would improve the performance of such entities and also help the government raise resources. The public-shareholding norms of Sebi were intended to increase the public float of listed companies to enable market liquidity and better price discovery. However, in the case of LIC both the principles of disinvestment and public shareholding have been diluted. LIC was listed two years ago in May 2022 with a public float of just 3.5 per cent. The government was expected to sell its stake subsequently to achieve the stated listing norms. However, it has not happened thus far.

One reason for the government's reluctance could be the performance of the LIC stock. After being issued at ₹949, the share price slipped below ₹540 in March 2023. Thus, a follow-on public offer would have fetched a much lower price. In fact, the stock price could have corrected further in anticipation of an increased supply of shares in the market. But this may also mean that the initial issue got more favourable pricing. Since the stock price recovered after the shock, the government could have sold its stake to comply with the public-shareholding norms. Given the LIC's full market capitalisation of over ₹6 trillion, the government would have raised a significant amount to push its capital expenditure programme and reduce the fiscal deficit. But this was not done.

However, irrespective of the price correction and possible political compulsion, events like these set avoidable precedents. It is worth noting that LIC is not an isolated case. The market data shows that there are more than 20 listed entities, including public-sector banks, where the government shareholding is above 75 per cent. In fact, it is 90 per cent or more in 12 companies. From a purely economic standpoint, it is puzzling that when the government is running a high fiscal deficit and aims to boost capital expenditure, it is not enthusiastically pursuing disinvestment. Since stock markets have also been supportive in recent times, selling stakes in PSEs to just comply with public shareholding norms would have given the government a significant amount of resources. More importantly, it would have avoided the need to make exceptions for PSEs.

Rapid AI transition

ChatGPT's new version raises old questions

Nearly 18 months after OpenAI launched its artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, ChatGPT, the Microsoft-backed company has launched its latest large language model (LLM) called GPT-4o. In doing so, OpenAI reaffirms its dominant position globally in the AI space. However, other tech giants like Meta and Google are not far behind. Google, for example, has started powering its search engine with AI Overviews. The main point of departure between GPT-4o and previous versions of ChatGPT lies in its ease of interaction. ChatGPT was primarily a text-based LLM interface where users could type text-based questions and wait for text-based responses. Besides, ChatGPT-4 was only available to paid subscribers. GPT-4o, in contrast, is free, easier to use, and is able to mimic human interaction in real time. It is also a multimodal AI model — integrating audio, speech, vision, and text with minimal time lag, enabling verbal communications with a chatbot that convincingly speaks like a human.

Further, it is capable of translating text, identifying emotion and tone in users' speech, solving mathematical equations and much more, making it uncannily human-like. The latest technological development augurs well for both OpenAI and its investors like Microsoft. Currently valued at more than \$80 billion, OpenAI's valuation has tripled in less than 10 months. Even though AI-led disruption is already evident in labour markets across the world, it remains to be seen whether generative AI models and LLM interface adoption will have a net positive effect on labour market outcomes in the medium term. AI-induced automation not only promises higher productivity and standard of living, it evokes fear of job dislocation, increasing unemployment, and deepening poverty. The impact of AI is also likely to differ significantly across countries. Developing countries like India, relying on labour-intensive employment, are expected to face less AI-led disruption. At the same time, they may find it difficult to catch up with early AI-driven productivity gains, given their infrastructure deficit and lack of a skilled workforce. The 2024 Work Trend Index Annual Report, recently released by Microsoft and LinkedIn, reveals a striking increase in AI utilisation in the workplace globally, with its use nearly doubling in the past six months. Around 75 per cent of respondents reported that AI performed most of the mundane tasks, thereby saving time, boosting creativity, and allowing them to focus on more important work.

At the same time, concerns regarding the skills gap in terms of AI literacy, the possibility of occupational layoffs, inadequate resources for the reskilling and upskilling of workers, the spread of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and cybersecurity risks remain critical from a policy standpoint. The rapid pace of AI evolution can result in disruption at many levels. While firms and individuals are adopting AI at a rapid pace, the productivity boost could be at the cost of human employment, at least in the initial stage. It's not clear at this stage how the policy establishment in India and around the world will deal with such potential challenges. But that's not the only challenge. The creation and dissemination of information and opinions are evolving in ways that were not known until recently and will have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, given the backdrop, while India must actively pursue productivity gains, it's vital for the policy establishment to remain vigilant.

Love and loss in Palestine



BOOK REVIEW

SAURABH SHARMA

Israel has been plundering Palestinian land for aeons. Since October 7, 2023, in which Hamas—a Palestinian Sunni Islamist group, which is also considered a terrorist group—attacked Israeli communities along Israel's southern fence with Gaza, killing at least 1,139 people and taking 252 hostages, Israel's counter reaction has been disproportionate. As of May 14, 2024, more than 35,000 people have been killed, the United Nations (UN) says half a million Gazans have been forced to flee and 80 per cent of healthcare centres in Gaza have been destroyed. Yet when student organisations in

the US and Europe are organising protests and raising slogans to "Free Palestine", they are labelled "anti-Semitic", particularly by allies of the Israeli state. This ugly aspect is reflected in two confusing literary occurrences. First, a giant literary figure's loosely argued, unconvincing two-sidedism. Yes, I'm referring to Zadie Smith's *New Yorker* essay "War in Gaza, Shabbolets on Campus" (May 5). Second, the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting was awarded to the staff of *The New York Times* for their "wide-ranging and revelatory coverage of Hamas' lethal attack in southern Israel on October 7, Israel's intelligence failures and the Israeli military's sweeping, deadly response in Gaza."

Since Mr Smith and NYT refuse to call a genocide a genocide, it's best to turn to the interesting choice on the part of the Pulitzer Prize committee to award in the General Non-Fiction category Jerusalem-based Jewish journalist Nathan Thrall, author of *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*.

A Palestine Story. In the US edition, published by Metropolitan Books, the subtitle was different though: *Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy*, making one wonder if the mention of Palestine in the subtitle would have invited resistance.

Mr Thrall writes that this book was born out of an article he wrote for *The New York Review of Books* with the same title. It was a report on Dahiyat-a-Salama-based Abed Salama's search for his five-year-old son who was on a picnic-bound bus that met with an accident. Had Israel not created obscure entry-exit rules for Palestinians in the region and had their rescue teams been deployed in a timely manner, the children who died in the bus that caught fire could have been saved.

Mr Thrall's reporting reads like fiction, for it has all the elements of an intergenerational saga set against the backdrop of the Palestinian people's struggle to claim their land. The book effectively draws a parallel between Salama's life and the shifting political gears in political history.

In the Prologue, for instance, the author notes that when Salama heard of the accident and that children's burned bodies were being identified, he, shockingly, first thought of his ex-wife: "Am I being punished for what I did to Asmahan?" Salama had married Asmahan in 1993 after a fallout with the love of his life, Ghazl. That was the year

"Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords, which brought an end to the intifada and led to the formation of the Palestinian Authority, the *sulta*, with its limited self-governing powers in the most heavily populated pockets of Gaza and the West Bank."

Compromise rarely leads to an assured future, however. Salama couldn't find happiness in his marital life and the couple eventually separated. Later, Salama married Haifa. It was their son, Milad Salama, who died in the accident.

How is all this linked to Israeli control, you may ask? There's a colour-

coded Israeli ID system that divides Palestinians. It came in response to the Second Intifada and the creation of a separation barrier—a wall, the construction of which was the largest infrastructure project in Israel's history. Its architect, Dany Tirza's story is featured in the book. The wall isolates East Jerusalem from the West, making it

impossible for Palestinians to access certain parts of the geography without a permit. These connections with how Israeli occupation impacts everyday lives helps Mr Thrall's reportage go beyond the personal story. Huda

Dahbour, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) doctor, who is introduced to the reader in the second part, exemplifies this. Ms Dahbour worked for UNRWA's Jerusalem headquarters in Sheikh Jarrah until Israel made it impossible for her to enter the city. Now

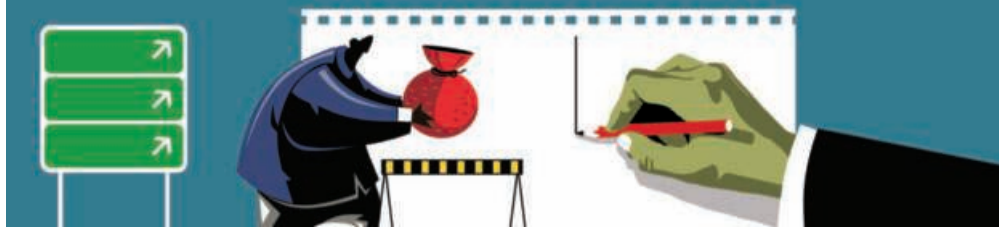
she treats patients in a mobile clinic in the West Bank." Her team helped rescue a dozen children in the accident.

Engrossing and thought-provoking, this book was a result of Mr Thrall's engagement with the story for over three years. But one doesn't need that much time to realise what's happening in Palestine. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappé notes in "The Futility and Immorality of Partition in Palestine" in *On Palestine* (Penguin, 2015), co-authored with Noam Chomsky, "Zionism has done, and continues to do, whatever it can to divide the Palestinian people and guide all of them to a dead end."

Will stakeholders in this long-running tragedy rely on Mr Smith's unscrupulous use of language that transfers power to the oppressor? Or will they acknowledge Palestinian's resilience and mobilisation in the face of unrelenting tragedy—of which Mr Thrall's book is but a sneak peek? The answer will certainly determine the trajectory of human rights in the decades to come.

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Regulatory fee or unjust enrichment?

Regulators are empowered to levy fees for services rendered, not to impose tax-like levies to create surpluses for themselves

In an exchange filing recently, BSE stated that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has asked it to pay the regulatory fee on the annual turnover, considering the "notional value" in the case of options contracts. The communication from Sebi further advised BSE to pay this amount retrospectively, i.e., from the financial year (FY) 2006-07, with 15 per cent interest per annum. The amount is expected to be close to ₹70 crore. Financial and fiscal experts find this odd and wrong.

How does a regulator get resourced? One of the reasons why we have regulators is the desire to distance them from the fray of politics and the elected government. This domain autonomy, in turn, requires financial autonomy. Arm's length regulators should not be dependent on the government for their spending, as this could undermine their independence. The regulator may feel pressured to align its decisions with the interests of the people controlling its purse strings. Even if the regulator maintains formal independence in its decision-making processes, financial dependence can create a perception of bias in the eyes of stakeholders. One of the reasons to have an independent regulator is to persuade private investors that there is a predictable rule-of-law environment. Hence, it is essential to establish mechanisms that achieve adequate and secure funding for regulators. This has been done through the power to charge fees.

The single big idea of public policy is that every power of a state organisation must be surrounded by an elaborate system of checks and balances. In India,

regulators have had the power to impose fees without commensurate checks and balances. As a consequence, we have seen episodes of self-aggrandising behaviour. There is a propensity to levy high fees, support expansive expenditure programmes, and amass pools of assets. The inexplicable events around the charges placed upon BSE are part of this larger pattern.

As an example, in the last five financial years, Sebi has reported a large and growing surplus of income over expenditure (including capital expenditure). Of its total income of ₹1,404 crore in 2022-23, around 86 per cent was generated through the fees/subscriptions it charges from entities. It generated an income not only sufficient to perform and fulfil its regulatory duties but also large enough to be in surplus of more than ₹500 crore in this FY. In fact, it ended the FY with a closing balance of ₹4,508 crore. The surplus has been approximately ₹484 crore in FY22, ₹158 crore in FY21, ₹225 crore in FY20, and ₹471 crore in FY19. Sebi's income and profits are now larger than those of many financial firms.

How can we do things better? What is the design to ensure autonomy without empire building by regulators?

1. Indian courts have repeatedly ruled on the distinction between taxes and fees levied by public authorities. A tax is a compulsory extraction of money by a public authority for public purposes enforceable by law, whereas fees are payment for services rendered. In fees, there is an element of quid pro quo between the individual payer and the public authority, which is absent in a tax. Bodies like Sebi are authorised to only levy fees which have relation to the service rendered. This implies that ad valorem charges



AARTHIKAM CHINTANAM

K P KRISHNAN

Measuring up to the standard

In an era when rapid technological advancement fuels economic growth, the landscape of standards-making and governance has undergone a significant transformation. Each new technological innovation necessitates standardisation for widespread global adoption. However, the pace of adoption, particularly in innovative digital technologies, often outstrips the traditional standard development processes, leading to emergence of de facto standards, such as the Windows operating system or the Intel CPU architecture.

The rapid technological evolution has reshaped the landscape of global standardisation bodies. Traditional entities like the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC), and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which were heavily influenced by national governments, have been supplanted by industry-led organisations tailored for specific sectors. For example, internet-related standards are now primarily shaped by the industry-led Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and non-profit ICANN, among others. Similarly, the 3rd Generation Partnership Project (3GPP) has become the key arbiter of telecommunications standards. This shift towards specialised bodies allows for more agile responses to the unique demands of the rapidly evolving industries. Companies at the forefront of technology development dominate these standard-making bodies, standardising patented innovations into standard essential patents (SEPs), generating substantial wealth. For example, the 3G technology alone resulted in over 23,000 SEPs, yielding hundreds of billions of dollars in revenue.

Standards have become critical in international trade after import tariffs were reduced following the Uruguay Round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations. Some governments employ standards, or technical regulations, to control imports, mandating local testing and certification, or using other ways of raising costs, thus hindering market access. Despite WTO's Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement aiming to mitigate such barriers, weak enforcement limits its efficacy. Consequently, standards now hold not only technical relevance but also geopolitical and strategic value, prompting nations to vie for influence in global standard-making bodies.

India's track record in standards management has been mixed. The Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) Act, 1986, was expected to create a world-class standards governance in the country by providing a centralised statutory framework for formulating and enforcing standards across all sectors. However, shortcomings emerged in both standard formulation and standard enforcement. India struggled to create an ecosystem where domestic innovations could lead to the development of national, let alone global, standards. Though BIS formulated over 20,000 Indian standards, these were largely adaptations of global standards.

It failed to formulate standards for technological innovations like laminate poly-packs pioneered by Tata Tea, software products like Tally or Finale, or traditional Indian practices like water-harvesting and below-sea-level farming. These highlight a missed opportunity to incentivise Indian innovation through standardisation. BIS also struggled to get Indian standards adopted within industry and governments. Despite their availability, many government tenders still referenced global standards, as Indian standards weren't obligatory. Under the BIS Act, mandating an Indian standard required obtaining a licence, burdened with regulatory control and inspector-raj issues, leading to resistance from industry. Consequently, by 2013, only a few Indian standards were mandated, while global standards remained popular in the Indian market, disadvantaging Indian manufacturers, while foreign companies easily accessed the Indian market.

In 2013, India witnessed a ground-breaking breakthrough. Faced with the surge of sub-standard and unsafe Chinese electronic goods, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) issued a compulsory registration order, mandating safety standards for laptops, desktops, mobile phones, microwave ovens, and other electronic goods. This marked the first occasion when a technical regulation under the BIS Act got widespread adoption in India since it introduced a self-registration scheme that replaced the burdensome licence-based system. Manufacturers underwent testing and certification by accredited labs, after which BIS granted them registration for sales in India. Remarkably, within months, the scheme garnered over 90 per cent adoption. The introduction of the scheme itself was incredible to most because the extant BIS Act only provided



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR

are inappropriate: The fees charged by Sebi to any one organisation (such as BSE) should be connected to the cost incurred at Sebi in regulating BSE.

This is not a new issue. Many years ago, Sebi proposed increasing the ad valorem fee for renewal of the annual registration of some regulated entities. Questions were raised in the Sebi Board on this and the nexus between the fee and the service rendered by Sebi. Sebi was forced to reduce the fee, and since then, Sebi has moved away from an ad valorem fee to a fixed fee for most such registrations and renewals.

2. A government organisation that charges high fees and amasses a large corpus is probably also a government organisation that spends too much. Greater care needs to be taken in establishing the spending envelope of these organisations. A Sebi that has a lower resource envelope will be more selective in choosing important regulation making and supervision projects.

3. The place where all these issues come together is the board of the organisation. Modern thinking on regulation has emphasised the importance of the role and composition of the board. The board of every organisation is about protecting the interests of the ultimate stakeholders against the self-interest of the full time staff of the organisation. The board must apply constitutional principles and block ad-valorem fees. The board must push asset pools out of the organisation up to the Ministry of Finance. The board must run a budget process each year, where cost control is implemented, and where the managers are held accountable to deliver improvements in the working of the organisation in return for increases in the budget.

4. It is unwise for Indian public finance to have multiple treasuries all over the Indian government landscape. Hence, the parliament amended the Sebi Act through the Finance Act, 2019, for transfer of the surplus. Oddly, after this amendment was passed by Parliament and approved by the President, it has not been notified. Sebi has remitted about ₹1,000 crore to the Consolidated Fund of India, but the Sebi Act amendment has been put into cold storage.

5. The energy and human talent available to engage in these questions is limited. It is difficult to solve these problems separately for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Sebi, or others. Ensuring financial propriety and extracting pools of cash that have built up at the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority, RBI, Sebi, and other such regulators has consumed many years of effort by India's scarce public policy resources. It is better to use the approach of the Financial Sector Legislative Reforms Commission, where the idea is to have a single parliamentary law that sets forth the correct framework to shape the workings of all financial agencies.

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for licence-based technical regulation, yet MeitY devised a self-registration scheme under the same Act, invoking the residual powers of the government. Beyond enhancing product safety, the scheme spurred investment in testing infrastructure and attracted world-class testing to meet industry demands.

The scheme represented a turning point in India's standards of governance. Capitalising on its success, the BIS amended the Act in 2016 to mainstream self-registration and self-certification, fostering greater adoption of Indian standards across industries. Consequently, the number of products complying with mandatory standards surged from a handful to over 500 by 2023, with expectations of adding 1,500 to 2,000 more in the near future. Moving ahead, benchmarking India's schemes with global compliance costs should be done as a measure to facilitate even greater adoption of Indian standards. BIS should aim for simplified standard adoption, supported by effective monitoring and stringent penalties for non-compliance. This represents a departure from the conventional approach, which emphasised rigorous, complex, and costly adoption with lenient monitoring.

BIS needs to extend reforms to standards formulation. India's innovation landscape has transformed dramatically in the past decade, with over 2,00,000 registered startups and a four-fold increase in patent applications between 2013-14 and 2022-23. India should embrace a culture of developing indigenous standards, harnessing the power of 1.4 billion users and a multi-trillion-dollar market to elevate Indian standards to the global stage. To achieve this, firstly, we need industry-led agile and responsive standard formulation bodies, empowered through amendments to the BIS Act, with BIS transitioning into a regulator overseeing these industry-led entities. Secondly, the government should incentivise Indian participation in global standard-making bodies by subsidising startups and industry professionals. Thirdly, the Ministry of External Affairs could support Indian experts in securing a seat on the high-table of the global standard-making bodies, especially in sectors like software and fintech, among others, in which Indian industry and startups have demonstrated great prowess.

In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the clarion call of "zero defect zero effect". Could India not reference its "Make-in-India" initiative with this new standard and socialise it to make it a global standard? All that is needed is a change in mindset.

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Opinion

FRIDAY, MAY 17, 2024



INDIA'S 5G ROLLOUT

Union electronics & IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

“The world's fastest rollout of 5G has happened in India. And the whole world is surprised by this. Now in the world, everyone says that if it happens in India, it will be of a different scale”

Beyond June 4

Concerns over impact of election results seem overblown as the long-term prospects for Indian stocks look good

THE VOLATILITY IN the stock markets has prompted top ministers of the ruling government to try and calm investors by reassuring them that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will return with a strong majority. This was in response to apprehensions in some circles that the BJP may win the ongoing general elections by only a slim margin because of the relatively subdued voter turnouts. That may have prompted some investors to take a little risk off the table in the belief that a not-so-comfortable majority might slow down the speed of reforms, which in turn could impact the economy's growth trajectory. Attempting to dispel their fears, Union home minister Amit Shah advised investors to “buy before June 4” when the results will be declared, saying stock prices would shoot up after a dominant victory for the BJP. External affairs minister S Jaishankar expressed confidence the markets would stabilise after the election results are announced. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has promised more efficiency, stability, and predictability in the market after Prime Minister Narendra Modi returns for a third term, assuring investors of a “soft-touch” regulatory framework along with more governance and a less government.

Whether foreign portfolio investors (FPI), who have offloaded stocks worth some \$4 billion since April and \$3.2 billion in May alone, do a U-turn remains to be seen. They also hold bearish positions in the derivatives markets. But it's not just the uncertainty over the outcome of the elections that is seeing FPI fund flow out. The risk-reward ratio is less favourable now in India than in other markets where the returns look more promising. Many have taken their money to China; the MSCI China index has gone up 20% in the last three months and 12% in the last one month. The Hong Kong and Taiwan markets have also done well. Indeed, while India's weight in the MSCI EM Index may have increased steadily, active global emerging market funds have remained underweight.

It is a fact that valuations are rich at a time when corporate earnings for the fourth quarter of FY24 have been a bit of a mixed bag. Revenues for the universe of companies (excluding banks and financials), which have announced numbers for the March quarter, have grown only at about 7-8%. The growth in the bottom line has been muted. As such the upgrades to earnings have been few with many more downgrades. The Nifty 50 is now trading at around 21 times one-year forward earnings, and a fairly big premium to the MSCI EM, leaving only a small cushion for any disappointments.

While the macro-environment looks good going by headline numbers, there are some pressure points. For one, it is now clear interest rates are going to remain higher for longer. Again, while there is optimism on rural recovery, spending is understood to have contracted. In fact private consumption expenditure data reveals slow growth in the past several quarters. Again, the global slowdown could hurt the country's exports. But there are enough businesses that are faring well and the outlook for many companies is promising. Domestic savings are being channelled into equities as is evident from the huge collections in SIP (systematic investment plans), which now average some ₹16,000 crore a month. Should the BJP not fare as well as expected, the markets might pare some of its gains. But the long-term prospects for Indian stocks look good.

Why Mercedes' \$100,000 electric jellybean flopped

WHEN MERCEDES-BENZ GROUP AG unveiled a luxury electric sedan called the EQS in 2021, managers boasted about the radical aerodynamic design, billing it as the German automaker's most significant launch in decades. Three years later, the electric version of the flagship S-Class risks becoming one of the biggest flops in Mercedes' storied history, and its shortcomings have contributed to the company's decision to ditch a goal of selling only electric vehicles by 2030.

The German automaker's stumble shows the dangers premium carmakers face as they try to take on Tesla Inc. and persuade their conservative clientele to get a plug. It also underscores the need to better protect EV resale values.

Capacious S-Class limousines have chauffeured political and business leaders for decades, and are especially popular with Chinese elites. However, Mercedes opted for a less boxy design for the EQS, which was built on technical underpinnings developed specifically for EVs. Not only would the curved silhouette — which the company immodestly compared to a bullet train and critics dubbed a jellybean — reduce air resistance and thus boost efficiency and driving range, the EQS would also be clearly distinguishable from vehicles that have a combustion engine. Mercedes even sacrificed the traditional standing three-point star on the hood, instead integrating the badge into a sleek black radiator panel.

Sales of the luxury electric sedan declined 40% to just 14,100 units last year, according to Mercedes' annual report. Price cuts in China and heavily discounted US lease deals failed to revive demand while undermining the company's strategy of prioritising high values over sales volumes. Combustion engine S-Class deliveries were more than six times higher.

Chief executive officer Ola Källenius has put on a brave face, telling investors in February that customers were very happy with their purchase. But the company's recent announcement of extensive upgrades to the vehicle speaks volumes. Along with a larger battery, these “status-conscious” improvements include a more traditional radiator grille featuring chrome-plated slats, a standing star on the hood, plus new seating options so rear passengers feel less impinged. Costs associated with these updates contributed to a steep decline in the Mercedes' car unit's profitability in the first quarter, when its fully electric car sales declined 8% compared with the prior year.

The tweaks may help a bit, but there's little the company can do about the sedan's much-criticised shape — while not so to my taste, a bulbous seven-seat EQS SUV is proving more popular. And the EQS still doesn't come with the 800-volt fast-charging system available on EVs at lower price points.

Sensibly, Mercedes chose not to market the electric G-Class as the “EQG” when it was unveiled last month, and its classic off-road silhouette remains instantly recognisable. Jaguar Land Rover Automotive Plc appears to be taking a similarly conservative approach with the forthcoming electric Range Rover which will include only “subtle” hints that it comes with a plug. Meanwhile, Ferrari NV has emphasised that its first EV, expected next year, will sound like a true Ferrari.

Automakers also need to remain as flexible as possible to adapt to fluctuating demand for EVs. BMW AG's electric vehicles not only look much like its gasoline ones, they're built on the same platform. So far, its cautious approach is paying off, with its EV sales outstripping those of Mercedes.

However, premium carmakers won't persuade more consumers to go electric unless they also fix their horrible residual values. The cost of purchasing a one-year-old EQS is almost 48% lower than the average new price, according to a study by US auto search portal iSeeCars. That's the worst of any vehicle it analysed.

Consumer worries about technological obsolescence, high repair and insurance costs and establishing the condition of the battery are part of the problem. Another issue is pushing polarising, expensive EVs to early adopters. Mercedes is now feeling the impact with the full force of a bullet-train.

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THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

TRACKING MOVEMENT ON ROADS CAN GIVE A GOOD VIEW OF DEMAND AND SUPPLY PATTERNS

On the toll plaza trail

AKHILESH TILOTIA AKSHATA KALLOOR

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before the festival season. When calculating y-o-y growth, one needs to consider the lunar calendar for festival seasons. Since the road traffic typically precedes expected demand, tracking movement on Indian roads can give market participants a good view of underlying demand and supply patterns.

Linking freight to trade

While analysing data of June 2023 in our heat maps, we had noted that toll plaza points on the map to and from ports started to turn yellow (lower yoy growth) and, in some cases, red (reflecting a drop over last year), indicating an overall slowdown in traffic movements. Over the next few months, we could see the changes in India's goods exim trade broadly reflecting this slowdown. Again, over the next few months since June, as India's exports and imports picked up, the toll plazas

turned green. Data from toll plazas, especially those connecting to ports, can be used to act as an indicator for trade. Similarly, we found that the overall volume growth on roads tracks reasonably closely (with a one-month lag) with growth in e-way bills generated on the goods and services tax network.

Understanding state growth

We pulling together data on all toll plazas in respective states (see graphic). A mosaic of state-wise growth in tolls overtime can depict a one-shot comprehensive picture of growth over time and space.

Top 10 plazas

Mapping the top 10 toll plazas highlights the key revenue and traffic points: no surprise that the highest value tolls are on the roads connecting the northern hinterland to the western and eastern ports;

TOLL HEAT MAP: A SNAPSHOT OF INDIA'S ECONOMIC GROWTH

Growth in toll traffic (volume) across top 10 states, Mar 2023 to Mar 2024

Toll traffic	Mar '23	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan '24	Feb	Mar
Uttar Pradesh	6.0	5.7	8.7	7.8			8.7	8.5	8.1	9.0	0.7	3.9	8.1
Rajasthan	1.1	4.7	7.5	6.4			9.3	5.4	1.0	4.8	1.9	1.7	5.1
Maharashtra	4.8	6.7	10.8	10.3			8.2	(1.2)	7.3	6.7	5.6	3.3	4.1
Tamil Nadu	2.2	8.7	14.2	1.7			7.2	5.9	10.0	(0.7)	5.2	4.3	4.9
Karnataka	8.7	11.3	12.8	10.3			15.9	7.1	11.6	10.8	7.2	8.4	10.0
Andhra Pradesh	1.0	(0.2)	7.6	2.5			7.2	11.5	6.0	3.6	6.8	5.7	8.6
Madhya Pradesh	5.0	3.2	10.7	10.0			8.6	12.8	0.8	6.7	2.4	2.9	7.9
Gujarat	1.3	9.0	9.0	(2.4)			15.4	7.5	13.5	11.0	6.3	9.0	11.8
West Bengal	(2.1)	(2.0)	3.4	(1.1)			(0.1)	4.0	(0.8)	3.0	4.2	3.0	4.7
Telangana	3.7	0.8	8.0	3.0			9.9	10.1	6.4	6.6	6.3	9.0	8.3
India	6.5	6.0	9.9	7.5			9.4	7.3	7.1	7.0	4.9	2.9	6.1

Note: For more details on the calculations, please see the presentation on NIIF website

Source: Thurro, IHMCL, NIIF Research

Carbon credits: A flawed tool



SRINATH SRIDHARAN

Policy researcher and corporate advisor
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JUST AS A stable currency underpins economic transactions, a credible mechanism for valuing and trading carbon emissions is needed for propelling substantive progress towards net zero. Each time a new corporate scandal involving carbon credits emerges, such as the recent revelation of Shell's involvement in fake carbon credits reported by the *Financial Times*, the world's trust in the mechanism of carbon credits diminishes further. The crux of the challenge lies in the apparent alignment between governments and industry lobbies, which prioritise their interests.

Voluntary carbon markets, where buyers voluntarily purchase and trade offsets derived from emissions reduction or removal projects, have ignited a contentious debate. Advocates champion these markets as indispensable channels for bolstering climate finance and facilitating companies in achieving net-zero ambitions. Conversely, detractors assail voluntary schemes as elaborate greenwashing mechanisms, yielding scant impact on emissions reduction endeavours.

Carbon offsets epitomise the fusion of lofty ideals with the harsh realities of implementation. While theoretically compelling, they present inherent flaws. They engender a precarious equilibrium, contending with the stark verities of human nature, market dynamics, and regulatory maze and measurement inertia. Carbon credits are generated through activities aimed at storing, reducing, or preventing greenhouse gas emissions. However, rely-

ing solely on offsets to achieve emission reduction targets is inherently flawed and poses a significant risk of exacerbating the climate crisis. Analogous to a depreciated currency, carbon offsets grapple with a crisis of trust precipitated by inconsistencies in standards, verification processes, and project quality. This undermines the integrity of the carbon offset market, impeding its capacity to effectuate substantial emissions reductions.

Carbon credits, though touted as a mechanism to combat climate change by incentivising emission reductions among companies, perpetuate the misconception that emissions can merely be offset and temporarily, rather than fundamentally, reduced. This engenders a perilous complacency among corporations, enabling them to perpetuate pollution under the veneer of purchasing credits to “neutralise” their emissions.

Genuine progress in combatting climate change necessitates concerted efforts to curtail emissions at their source. Moreover, the concept of carbon credits presents a significant ethical dilemma. By commodifying the privilege to pollute, carbon credits establish a system where affluent entities can continue emitting greenhouse gases without consequence, while marginalised communities bear the environmental burdens and fallout of cli-

mate-related catastrophes.

Furthermore, the carbon credit market is rampant with loopholes and inconsistencies. The absence of standardised regulations and oversight results in disparities in the quality and reliability of carbon credits. In some instances, projects purportedly reducing emissions fail to deliver on their promises, engendering a false sense of achievement and squandering valuable resources.

The phenomenon of carbon-washing increases these challenges, as entities procure ineligible or subpar carbon credits to offset their emissions. This practice undermines the integrity of carbon markets and the efficacy of climate change mitigation endeavours. Besides, carbon-washing threatens to divert investments away from genuine emission reduction projects, impeding progress in achieving net-zero emissions and exacerbating the climate crisis.

The undue influence of wealthy global corporations within the framework of carbon credits is a glaring issue that undermines genuine action. These influential entities wield significant political power and often exploit regulatory loopholes to their advantage. Holding these corporations accountable and ensuring they bear the true cost of their pollution is essential. However, this task is complicated by the fact that many of these corporations are

Carbon credits perpetuate the misconception that emissions can merely be offset and temporarily, rather than fundamentally, reduced

headquartered in affluent nations, which themselves have failed to fulfill their commitments to fund climate initiatives.

While advocating for setting up a universally recognised framework for carbon pricing and offsetting is crucial, scepticism persists regarding its feasibility and effectiveness. Despite acknowledging the importance of governmental support, industrial strategies, and regulatory measures, the historical implementation of such frameworks has been inconsistent. The reluctance of some nations to commit to meaningful climate action adds to these concerns.

While a robust carbon pricing mechanism holds promise, practical challenges and a lack of concrete actions to address systemic issues cast doubt on its ability to deliver transformative change.

While carbon credits may be an approach to reducing overall emissions, they ultimately fall short of delivering substantive results. Carbon credits can be likened to outsourcing physical fitness by paying someone else to work out on your behalf. While it may seem convenient, this approach fails to address the root causes of the problem. Purchasing carbon offsets doesn't fundamentally reduce carbon footprints, but it creates a false sense of accomplishment while allowing the underlying issue of emissions to persist. In order to truly combat climate change, we must prioritise genuine emission reductions rather than relying on offsetting measures that merely shift responsibility elsewhere.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rethink election schedule

When the fifth phase of Lok Sabha elections is round the corner, there are serious concerns about the prevailing campaign scenario. Several reports and analysis have been published in the media on the low voter turnout. The internally displaced persons (IDP), because of the nature of jobs, are away from their constituencies in

large numbers. Too many phases and a prolonged election period are causing fatigue and voter apathy. Too much focus on mobilising minorities on the fear factor is also a big concern. In a digitised society, the Election Commission of India should consider a new election strategy that conducts the polling in a shorter duration, besides allowing voting from remote locations for IDPs.

—Vinod Johri, Delhi

Chabahar and India

India's recent decade-long agreement with Iran regarding the Chabahar Port signifies a pivotal step in the country's regional strategy. The port offers India a crucial foothold in the region, allowing it to diversify trade routes and bypass Pakistan to establish direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The integration of Chabahar Port into the International

North-South Transport Corridor further enhances India's connectivity with key partners. By assuming operational control of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, India not only showcases its growing maritime capabilities but also demonstrates its commitment to fostering regional stability and prosperity.

—Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

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The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A right to fairness

SC verdict in Newslick case affirms that adherence to due process is more than a procedural requirement



FAIZAN MUSTAFA

DESCRIBED AS AN “executive’s court” in some quarters in recent times, the Supreme Court has proved its critics wrong yet again. A 41-page judgment of Justice Sandeep Mehta and Justice B R Gvai, authored by the former, has highlighted the importance of due process.

Due process of law is not only an important fundamental right but a time-tested yardstick to judge the maturity of a civilisation. But, is it just a procedural requirement? Or does it offer substantive protection against the state’s arbitrary exercise of power?

Justices Mehta and Gvai delivered their verdict in *Newslick* founder-editor Prabir Purkayastha’s case. Purkayastha was not informed of the “grounds of arrest” as required by the Constitution’s Article 22 before his production before the Additional Sessions Judge (ASJ). However, the ASJ mechanically passed the remand order at 6 am on October 4, 2023.

The SC verdict has rightly drawn a fine line between the “reasons of arrest,” which are formal and common to all arrested persons, and the “grounds of arrest,” which have to be peculiar to an individual arrested person. If the “grounds of arrest” are not communicated in writing, the right to life and personal liberty is violated making the arrest and detention illegal, despite repeated remand orders.

Even the first major human rights instrument, the *Magna Carta* (1215), talked of only procedural rights — of course, only of nobles or barons. Yet, it too was categorical that “no freeman shall be seized or imprisoned or stripped of his rights... except by the lawful judgment of his co-equals or by the law of the land.” The expression “due process” was used for the first time two centuries later in the statute of British King Edward III. But it was the Fifth Amendment to the American Constitution (1791) that introduced the concept of “due process” in a constitution. Subsequently, the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed, in addition to the right to equality, the right to life and liberty. It prohibited their curtailment without the due process of law.

However, it would be wrong to view due process as just a procedural safeguard. It involves the right to fairness, reasonableness, justness, non-arbitrariness. Several American laws have been struck down on criteria set by the Due Process Doctrine. New rights have also

been recognised under this doctrine.

The history of “due process” in India is equally fascinating, but deeply frustrating. In 1918, the Indian National Congress asked the colonial government to revoke all laws that allowed state authorities to arrest or detain people without due process. Balgangadhar Tilak and MK Gandhi invoked due process in their defence against unjust laws. But the framers of the Indian Constitution who had initially shown keen interest in the Due Process Doctrine abandoned it.

Constituent Assembly deliberations show how we went back on due process. On March 17, 1947, the Assembly received a note from K M Munshi, a member of the fundamental rights sub-committee. It included a draft provision: “No person shall be deprived of his life, liberty or property without due process of law”. Ambedkar’s own draft too included the expression, “due process of law”. The Fundamental Rights Sub-Committee approved the due process clause on April 15, 1947.

In subsequent deliberations of the Advisory Committee headed by Sardar Patel, few members such as C Rajagopalachari and Govind Ballabh Pant expressed reservations — they felt the clause could limit the legislative powers of the state. It was however B N Rau, not even a member of the Constituent Assembly but its adviser, who can be blamed for restricting the scope of Article 21. Borrowing from Irish (Article 40(4)) and Japanese (Article 31) constitutions, he proposed the insertion of “personal” before liberty and replaced due process with the narrower expression “procedure established by law”. Surprisingly, this major dilution was approved on January 18, 1948, by the drafting committee headed by Ambedkar, which met without quorum.

Several members were disappointed to see the due process clause being dropped. HV Pataskar talked about the danger of routine detentions for indefinite periods without this guarantee. K C Sharma maintained that due process provided minimum standards of fairness and without it, Article 21 cannot be termed a Fundamental Right. Kazi Karimuddin called it a sad chapter of our constitutional history. On December 7, 1948, Article 21 was adopted as Ambedkar failed to

take an unequivocal position in favour of due process. Bakshi Tek Chand termed Ambedkar’s act as “one of great mysteries”. K T Shah feared that people would be detained without trial on false pretences. The last 70 years have proved these Constituent Assembly members right.

Ambedkar tried to salvage the situation in September 1949 when he introduced Article 22 and termed it as a “compensation” for the omission of due process in the right to life and personal liberty. But then Article 22(1) and (2) incorporated the guarantees — right to counsel of choice and production — before the magistrate within 24 hours that were already part of the colonial government’s Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.

After independence, starting from its regressive judgment in *AK Gopalan* (1950) to *ADM Jabalpur* (1976), the SC contributed to undermining the due process by overemphasising the literal meaning of procedure established by law. The court did change its stand in the Bank Nationalisation case (1970) and extended the due process to the right to property. Subsequently, Justice Fazal Ali’s dissent in *Maneka Gandhi* (1978) became a majority opinion and due process was judicially recognised as part of the right to life and personal liberty. Every law must now be reasonable, just, fair and non-arbitrary. Moreover, the 44th Amendment (1978) made the right to life and personal liberty a non-derogable right that can no longer be suspended, even during an emergency.

In *Prasad Singla* (2023), the SC termed preventive detention laws as a colonial legacy with great potential of abuse. It said that every procedural requirement must be rigidly followed. India, however, continues to have several stringent preventive detention laws, both at the Centre and state levels. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) over 12,000 people were in prisons in 2021 under such laws and 76 per cent of prison inmates were under trial in 2022. Unfortunately, the part of the 44th amendment on preventive detention has not been notified even after 46 years.

The writer is Vice Chancellor, Chanakya National University Patna. Views expressed are personal

A WELCOME MESSAGE

SC order in Newslick case is heartening, reinforces importance of due process, regardless of the offence

TWO FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES of jurisprudence — “bail not jail” and “innocent until proven guilty” — are diluted in cases brought under “special” laws like the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). In these, investigating agencies and the prosecution are granted extraordinary powers of arrest and detention. In essence, such laws shift the burden of proof on the accused. Stringent provisions also place a high threshold for the grant of bail. By invalidating the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, founder-editor of the portal Newslick, the Supreme Court has upheld in principle and practice the constitutional protection offered to citizens under Article 22(1). The state argued that since Purkayastha is accused of serious offences such as “terrorist acts” and “raising funds for terrorist acts”, he should not be released on a “technicality”. The Bench of Justices B R Gvai and Sandeep Mehta said that every accused “has a fundamental and a statutory right to be informed about the grounds of arrest in writing and a copy of such written grounds of arrest have to be furnished to the arrested person as a matter of course and without exception at the earliest”.

In a legal system where the process can often be a form of punishment, the integrity of so-called technical procedures must be unimpeachable. Article 22(1) states that “No person who is arrested shall be detained in custody without being informed, as soon as may be, of the grounds for such arrest nor shall he be denied the right to consult, and to be defended by, a legal practitioner of his choice.” In *Pankaj Bansal vs Union of India* (2023), the SC held that furnishing “a written copy of the grounds for arrest” was mandated under the PMLA. In Purkayastha’s case, it found that since a similar provision exists in the UAPA, the accused should have been provided with the grounds of arrest before his detention. He was not. Essentially, and significantly, the Court has said that a fundamental right is not watered down in UAPA cases.

The Court made it clear that Purkayastha’s release — he was granted bail by the trial court hours after the SC order — was not a comment on the merits of the case or the charges against Newslick. The order does, however, underline the perils of what has become in practice an alternate justice system, meant to deal with “heinous” crimes. The provisions in such laws are, arguably, justifiable in exceptional circumstances, especially with respect to national security. However, their use has surged: NCRB data showed a 23 per cent rise in UAPA cases in 2022 compared to previous years, while the PMLA cases grew by 450 per cent in the first three years of the current government’s second term, compared to the same period in its first term. This context makes the SC’s order all the more welcome. It affirms once again the Court’s role as the guardian of individual rights. It is also a message to investigating agencies: Due process, and the “technical” procedures that comprise it, cannot be circumvented.

MY SCHEME, YOUR SCHEME

Congress’s promised grain ration of 10 kg/person/month speaks about a competitive politics of welfare and its limits

IN 2019, PRIME Minister Narendra Modi swept the Lok Sabha polls on the back of his government’s welfare schemes for building rural homes, toilets and roads, providing access to banking, electricity and LPG connections, and the Rs 6,000 annual cash transfer to landholding farmers. In 2024, the scheme that is seemingly a big draw among voters is the one giving 5 kg of free rice or wheat to about 813.5 million persons. Proof of its impact on the ground is the Congress, more than midway through the ongoing elections, promising to double the free ration quota for the “poor” among the scheme’s beneficiaries.

But schemes are only as good as their implementation. Just as the focused execution and near saturation coverage of the earlier flagship programmes helped cultivate a pro-poor image for Modi nationally during his first term, the free grain scheme delivered during the Covid crisis. Till the early 2000s, the southern states were largely the ones with reasonably well-functioning public distribution systems (PDS). By around 2015-16, they were joined by the likes of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal. But the Covid period saw NFSA beneficiaries even in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand actually receiving free grain. The ruling party’s victory in the 2022 Assembly elections in UP was widely attributed to the Modi-Yogi Adityanath “double-engine” government’s efforts at not just expanding the reach of the PDS, but also ensuring last-mile delivery of grain to eligible households.

The Congress’s promised grain ration of 10 kg/person/month is notable not only for the additional fiscal cost it would entail (even if restricted to the “poor”). It goes contrary to party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi’s recent pronouncement that government policies should aim at making people “atmanirbhar” (self-reliant), not “nirbhar” (dependent). At a public rally, she asked the crowd to choose between free 5-kg ration and employment that will earn them an independent income. The apparent about-turn and competitive free grain offer is, perhaps, also reflective of a deeper political economy malaise. Governments find it more expedient to deliver freebies, whether in kind or as direct cash transfers, than investing in public education, healthcare, irrigation or agricultural research and extension that take time to yield results. It doesn’t help that voters are also sceptical about state capacity and hence increasingly transactional and short-termist.

ONE-MAN ARMY

Carrying the baton through turbulent times, now hanging up his boots, Sunil Chhetri represents best of Indian football

NOT ALWAYS AMONG the best in the world, the skills of India’s football heroes haven’t gone unnoticed. There was the blistering pace of Chuni Goswami, inventiveness of Tulsidas Balam, aura of PK Banerjee, grace of Jo-Paul Ancheri, flair of IM Vijayan and flamboyance of Bhaichung Bhutia. Then, there’s Sunil Chhetri, the one-man army who kept reinventing himself, acted as a bridge between generations, made sure Indian football didn’t sink in the last decade. A star of his generation, the India captain announced on Thursday that he will hang up his boots after the 2026 World Cup and 2027 Asian Cup joint qualifier against Kuwait on June 6.

Chhetri’s greatness is often lost in the numbers: 150 national team matches and 94 goals. But statistics do not reveal his actual impact on Indian football. When he made his international debut as a 20-year-old, Chhetri had teammates who were born in the 1970s. When he quits as a 39-year-old, Chhetri will be surrounded by those born in 2002 and 2003. Carrying the baton diligently through turbulent times, he survived several churning. Bhutia’s era was of semi-professionals where the players held day-jobs to support their football dreams. Chhetri ushered in an age of full-blown professionalism in Indian football, right from the way the players played and what they ate. They had the enterprise to go the extra mile to fine-tune their skills and the daring to dream of a career abroad.

Chhetri’s emergence in the mid-noughties never allowed Indian fans to miss the legendary Bhutia. That might not be the case in the post-Chhetri era. He scored many goals and created some. He was a striker who could double up as a winger. A forward who would rush back to defend corners. A 5-foot-6-inch tall player who leapt over towering defenders and scored from headers. Who next after Chhetri is a question that has lingered for almost a decade. It continues to trouble football fans.

CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

Alice Munro’s short stories traced the unpredictable archaeologies of human hearts



PAROMITA CHAKRABARTI

THE DEATH OF a celebrated writer is an occasion to mourn losses — of her genius, the excellence of her craft, her prodigious intellect, the accolades that she had won over her lifetime, the circumstances of her writing life. But it is also a moment to remember how her words made one feel — a sense of being seen, heard, or perhaps, simply reassured about the universality of emotions, whose surfeit or absence forms the leitmotif of everyday life.

In ‘Family Furnishings’, a story from her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001), the Canadian writer and Nobel laureate Alice Munro, who died this week, wrote, “There was a danger whenever I was on home ground. It was the danger of seeing my life through eyes other than my own.” Munro’s gaze was anything but the other’s: There was both comprehension and empathy for the individual battles one fought in the privacy of one’s mind. What Munro held back from — most of the time — was omniscience, the writerly, almost patriarchal, tendency to explain the lives of protagonists back to them. Like her friend, the writer Margaret Atwood, she made female gaze a thing long before it gained currency.

What could it be about the lives of girls and women that Munro could get to the heart of, that set her apart? That despite their setting in rural Canada, their stories resonated with readers across the world? In the story ‘Too Much Happiness’ about the mathematician

and writer Sophia Kovalevsky, from the eponymous anthology, Munro writes, “Always remember that when a man goes out of the room, he leaves everything in it behind... When a woman goes out she carries everything that happened in the room along with her.” Munro mapped this storied baggage without critique — she wrote not so much about her characters but as them, sharing the bitter taste of their disappointments, the sudden flares of resentment, and the illicit thrill of hope. Like her readers, she both discovers and feels her way through relationships — marriage and infidelity, motherhood and daughterhood — but also through loneliness and grief, love and longing, desire and abandonment. It makes reading Munro a visceral experience, like a conversation with an old friend who knows the many versions of the person one has been.

In her Nobel Prize interview in 2013, Munro spoke of her affinity to happy endings. One of the first stories she heard as a child was Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*. Its sobering coda had made such an impression on her young mind that she was determined to rework its course to give the mermaid the happily ever after she deserved. By the time she began writing though, the spell had broken. Munro realised that happy endings were not the stuff of real life. They belonged in the realm of fantasies, in the hoariness of once-upon-a-times and relied on larger-than-life characters to prop

them up. Real life was the work of ordinariness, its tedium broken by the passage of time and messy, erratic chance. There is an interiority to Munro’s stories that comes from being an insider. The writer spoke often of drawing from her own life — her troubled relationship with her school-teacher mother who developed Parkinson’s when Munro was in her early 40s, the ennu of her first marriage, the solace that books offered, and learning to write amid domestic chores and childcare duties. The sparse economy of her short stories owed a debt to these roles she played in family life, the constraint of time that she battled against like every woman. In the unchanging routine of daily living, as men and women worked and sparred, lived and lost, she traced the unpredictable archaeologies of the human heart.

Unlike most of her counterparts, Munro consciously stayed away from an overtly public life, an achievement in itself, given the range of accolades that she garnered, from the Man Booker International Prize to the Nobel Prize. It could have been her characteristic diffidence but for her readers, it spelled confidence: Munro knew the vagaries of human nature like few others. Formal validations are necessary accoutrements of success, but beyond their endorsement, what remained was how Munro made her readers feel — seen and heard.

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MAY 17, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

TRIPURA FLOODS

THE DEATH TOLL has mounted to 27 in rain-battered Tripura where the Army has been alerted about further worsening of the situation in the wake of incessant cloudbursts and fresh landslides. About 1.25 lakh people were rendered homeless in the last four days. Chief Minister Nripen Chakravorty who reviewed the situation with officials, urged the Centre for Rs 1 crore grant as assistance for providing relief to the flood victims.

PUNJAB COPS ATTACKED

TERRORISTS AMBUSHED A police party, shot

at and injured a head constable in Amritsar district, looted a bank in Ferozepur district and set the employment exchange building on fire at Batala in Gurdaspur district in the last 24 hours in Punjab. The accused snatched a revolver from a sub-inspector and two rifles from constables in Amritsar district.

NO EVEREST CLIMB

A SECOND SUMMIT attempt by India’s Everest expedition was called off after an avalanche hit the expedition’s third high-altitude camp (7,320 mt), injuring one member and three Sherpa guides. The attempt was to have been made by Rekha Sharma and three other mem-

bers. N D Sherpa of the 5/3 Gorkha Rifles and three Nepalese Sherpas who were in the camp were seriously injured in the accident.

CBSE CLASS 12 RESULTS

O N BABUNARAYAN of Kendriya Vidyalaya, Kalpakkam (Tamil Nadu), has obtained the highest aggregate marks (378 out of 400) in the All-India Senior Secondary Certificate (Class 12) examination. M Sriam of Delhi School R K Puram New Delhi is second with 375 marks. Amongst girls, Madhu Anand of Manav Sthali Public School, New Delhi, has obtained the highest aggregate marks, 368 out of 400.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Thank you, Papa, our hero

My father, Sushil Modi, was a doer, proud of his actions, never scared to fail, but quiet, observant, thoughtful, patiently listening to criticism, self-correcting and seeking ways to help Bihar



AKSHAY AMRITANSHU

WHILE TRIBUTES POUR in for my father and we as a family deal with our emotions, it is overwhelming to be reminded of what a great man he was. My Life's Umbrella is the best phrase to describe him — when there was too much heat and pressure, he was the cover, when there was an emotional out-pour, he was the protector, when I fumbled, he was my walking stick.

While he was a "Modi", he surnamed us Tathagath and Amritanshu so that we find our own independent identities in life. While he was a science graduate, he regretted that he could not study further. He knew that providing us a good education would be his best investment. When I made it to Oxford to study law, he asked me to check if it was spam mail. Such was his grounded and practical approach in life.

Sending us to a boarding school in Ajmer, making sure he visited us every two months, dutifully traveling for our annual functions, celebrating every achievement, reminding us of verses from the Bhagavad Gita, was his way of telling us that we meant the world to him.

His day would be long, but he made sure the family ate dinner together. He would ask us about our day and guide us, making sure he was not spoon feeding us. When we went to study/work away from him, he spoke on the telephone every day, always concerned, listening patiently.

He reminded us that one inherits the family name, but life's experiences have to be learned and earned, through toil, dedication, patience, sacrifice and failure and there were no shortcuts.

He was a hard worker, disciplined to the core and a stickler for good habits. Party leaders used to complain that he would escape backstage before a meeting, open his *dabba*, finish two rolls and come back quietly. A rumour once spread that he loved *karelas*. For an entire month, wherever he went, he was served *karela*!

He was soft but blunt, sharp but not impulsive. My mother often wondered why he was a politician, soft spoken as he was, nice and unassuming. I often wondered if there was a better field for his talent. But he was never in doubt. He was a doer, proud of his actions, never scared to fail, but quiet, observant, thoughtful, patiently listening to criticism, self-correcting and seeking ways to help Bihar.

As a politician, he often annoyed people with his straight-forward approach. He ended up saying "no" to things he could not deliver, and never gave false assurances, even if it meant facing people's ire.

He had no tax background, in fact he was one of those who feared mathematics. But when the opportunity knocked to be the finance minister of the state or head the GST Empowered Committee, he took up the challenge head on. One had to "get a knack of the subject, then nothing was impossible", he would say. Seeking recommendations to read



C.R. Sasikumar

on a subject, ordering school books, speaking to experts (on whichever side of the spectrum), questioning them with child-like curiosity, cross questioning, redialing, at times apologising for calling again — till he was convinced.

While serving the government, he often returned home with an excited smile to tell us about a new scheme or project for the people, be it school-dress for girls, bicycles for school-children, roads being built. His conversations with us reflected his love for Bihar, its culture and its people and how being in the government was a way to give back to society, which had given him everything.

Once in late 2000, he came back home agitated and said, my life is for my party and my state. I don't love posts and I carry my resignation letter with me. I will serve my party and country till my last breath. That was his commitment and dedication to his party and to the values he was trained in.

As he realised that he was suffering from cancer, he was shaken but didn't give up. While he won the first round after surgery, the second round came as a shock. He realised that life had been shortened, but he made sure it didn't affect his work or party. Quietly and in pain after every chemotherapy session, he took the first flight to Nagpur to remain in Chhindwara for the state elections, or was up till late night for party meetings.

When time seemed to shrink even more, Papa was sad, but assured us that he would fight. I once asked him what he wished for and he said he had got everything in life; love, affection and, most of all, respect. His life was complete, with no regrets.

I think destiny's timeline was on his side. On April 3 he tweeted about his cancer and

His day would be long, but he made sure the family ate dinner together. He would ask us about our day and guide us, making sure he was not spoon feeding us. When we went to study/work away from him, he spoke on telephone every day, always concerned, listening patiently. He reminded us that one inherits the family name, but life's experiences have to be learned and earned, through toil, dedication, patience, sacrifice and failure and there were no shortcuts.

returned to Patna one final time. Over the next three days, every person who was associated with him for over half a century, paid him their respects. By the fourth day, his condition deteriorated and we flew him back to Delhi and admitted him to AIIMS, where he remained till his last breath.

Before passing away, he asked us for chocolate and ice cream, his favourites in an otherwise disciplined life.

On the 12th evening, he got up suddenly and asked to switch on the news to see the PM's rally in Patna, his *karmabhoomi*. That was the last that he saw, perhaps satisfied for all that he had done and achieved.

Thereafter, he slept and quietly passed away.

Through all the upheavals in life, his faith in the Sangh, belief in his party's ideals, excitement in nurturing young talent, and hope for a bright future for Bihar remained intact. He was a shy, soft, dedicated and courteous man. His gentleness was his strength, which was sometimes perceived as his weakness.

Now when I see the overflow of emotions, tributes, stories from across the political spectrum of how he influenced people and how he was a part of so many lives, I realise that it is Bihar that fueled him, shaped his character, gave him his sense of purpose.

While his journey continues, in this world and another, I am sure he will continue to do what he loved the most, serving his beloved country and its people.

Thank you, Papa. You were our hero. We will cherish you, always.

The writer is an Advocate on Record in the Supreme Court of India

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"In order to uphold its image as a neutral interpreter of the constitution and other laws, the judiciary could do its bit by declining to hear cases of certain nature that are best decided through political dialogue, or through healthy discussions in the sovereign parliament." — THE KATHMANDU POST

The no-contest in Surat and Indore

Winning unopposed may boost the BJP's strength, but diminishes democracy



K K KAILASH

WHEN THE DISTRICT election officer declared Mukesh Dalal as the winner of the Surat Lok Sabha constituency, he became the first representative to be elected to the yet-to-be-inaugurated 18th Lok Sabha. Dalal won unopposed. In competitive multiparty systems, this is a rare event, and unsurprisingly, it raised a lot of eyebrows. It was then revealed that the nomination papers of the primary challenger, the Congress candidate, were rejected. The papers of the Congress substitute candidate had been rejected earlier, and others in the fray, including the BSP nominee, withdrew their names.

A couple of days later, in Madhya Pradesh, the Congress candidate for the Indore Lok Sabha seat withdrew his candidature on the last day. However, the Surat incident couldn't be replicated as the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) dug its heels in by refusing to withdraw.

This travesty of electoral democracy raises two issues. The BJP has been winning Surat and Indore handsomely over nine Lok Sabha elections since 1989, and more often than not, the party has received more than 50 per cent of the votes. Comparative studies show that parties tamper with electoral processes when they want to win/maintain power at any cost or when the race is too close to call. However, this does not help us understand why the party attempts to do so in states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, where its standing is undisputed.

The first issue then is why does the party need to influence the process? What does it seek to achieve? Is there anything beyond winning elections that matters?

The BJP is, in many ways, a victim of its own success. It has had to invent ways to better its own attempts to stay in the front, and these manoeuvres have often pushed ethical boundaries. The Surat incident may serve the ends of the party but is not necessarily in the spirit of democracy. Travesties such as Surat are a signalling device and we need to look beyond elections to make sense of them. The party has two audiences, one internal, which includes party cadre and supporters and the other is external, which includes other political parties, their supporters, and the general public.

Various commentators have underlined over the last couple of months that the BJP has maxed out in its traditional strongholds. Consequently, the party has been setting targets like obtaining 50 per cent of votes and winning 400 seats. These goals are intended to enthrone the cadre in the states where the party faces feeble challengers, and there is nothing left to win in terms of seats. What happens in states like Gujarat, where the party has already been hitting these targets?

The thrill of dismantling a competitor without a contest can give the cadre a heady feeling. It makes the party appear commanding, forceful, and uncompromising. Being part of an organisation that is continually focused on achieving its goals gives workers a sense of purpose. This also serves to maintain the leadership status—quo as no one wants to break a winning run.

Such instances also send a message to those outside, including allies and competing parties. They help in muscle flexing, besides acting as a distracting mechanism. For the public, Congress appears weak, a party that cannot keep its flock together. Internally, the effects can be devastating; while the party is forced to spend resources on fire-fighting, it also sows seeds of distrust. It increases suspicion, as the gel that binds the party — trust — is thrown out of the window.

On the face of it, candidates voluntarily withdrawing nominations and papers being rejected on technical grounds is not an infraction of the law, especially when there are no formal complaints of wrongdoing. It is not necessarily an electoral fraud in the league of booth-capturing, intimidating voters, stuffing of ballot boxes, and impersonation. Unlike these blatant violations, where there is a clear party linkage, here there is no direct connection with the party. It can't be blamed as it has not violated any procedures.

This brings us to the second lesson. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, in their magisterial *How Democracies Die* (2018), note, the contemporary weakening of democracy does not take place through overt, bold, and theatrical subversion tactics like coups but by turning democracy against itself by using the rules and institutions in place. The undermining occurs at the margins, where regulations are breached but not necessarily overturned. There is no crossing the line; instead, there is an attempt to pay constant homage to the law.

The Surat incident extends the ongoing "lawfare" — the use of legal instruments to check political opponents. Since this battle is couched in technical language and relies on the letter of the law, it appears innocuous to most people. Moreover, the party can claim high moral ground — that it sticks to procedural correctness. However, in practice, the supposed respect for the law often violates its spirit and thus contributes to the gradual erosion of democratic norms.

For a party that has defeating the Opposition at any cost as its primary goal, any slip is a loss. A victory, without crushing the opposition and with lower numbers, will be read as a deficit. How a person is elected, unopposed or not, does not make any difference to the seats won. However, winning unopposed demonstrates the ability to utilise power without scruples. It may boost the party's strength, but diminishes democracy in the process leading to the erosion of a shared understanding of what makes institutions work.

The writer is with the Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad. Views expressed are personal.



RUCHI GUPTA

The age of stupid

We are witnessing a crisis of values, not of intellect

WE LIVE IN the age of the stupid. It's not that people were not stupid before, or that we don't have brilliant people in our midst anymore. The difference is that stupidity is now mainstream and legitimate. There's not only a palpable sense of intellectual stagnation but non-serious individuals who would have earlier remained on the fringes of societal decision-making are now setting the agenda and exercising power. It is important to explore how this has happened.

Institutions of knowledge have been traditional sources of intellectual authority in society. Such institutions attracted the best and the brightest and provided a platform for collaboration and intellectual advancement. However, there has been a decline in the quality of institutional leadership across sectors and geographies. This decline has more to do with lack of integrity and moral courage than deficits in intellectual ability — but the resultant compromises have had an inevitable impact on the intellectual output of these institutions.

Moreover, institutions as a whole have struggled to keep pace with the rapid changes in society, in part due to rigid hierarchies and bureaucratic processes that have made them appear insular and unrepresentative. These factors have led to a widespread erosion of trust in institutions and loss of institutional credibility.

In this vacuum of intellectual authority, social media — with its global reach and assiduously value-blind approach to content — has powered the rise of a new class of in-

dividuals who are able to shape public opinion without necessarily having the depth of knowledge or experience expected from intellectual leaders. Serious engagement with the world and its constraints pushes thinking forward; however, the discrete, ad-hoc, and transient nature of social media requires not deep thinking but constant visibility. In any case, most of these individuals are not renegades looking to stand up to institutions or create a counter culture but social media influencers telling people what to buy, do and think. This modern-day evangelism has suffused our discourse with the gospel of stupid.

While this may describe our world right now, the question is what about our society has led to such a precipitous decline in the quality of institutional leadership. One aspect of this is the erosion of shared values which has created a pervasive atmosphere of moral relativism in which there is no clear demarcation between what is right and wrong. This moral relativism has been accompanied by the concomitant veneration of an ends-justify-means culture, in which wrongdoing is not only free from societal reprobation but is actually admired as long as it leads to success. Closely related to this is the sense that leadership positions are merely a vehicle for personal prestige and enrichment instead of imposing any responsibility for maintaining standards or for the greater collective good. These shifting societal mores have made opportunism, insularity and spinelessness virtually cost-free. The

rise of partisanship has further dealt a blow to the intellectual foundations of our society. In a world where everything is viewed through the lens of "us vs them", the aim of winning power takes precedence over intellectual honesty. This has led to a decline in the quality of discourse and a lack of internal questioning within partisan groups.

Given this context of moral relativism and partisanship, the way institutions select and promote leaders almost always leads to sub-par leadership. Institutional leaders are not chosen for their brilliance or moral courage but are selected through a process or nominated in an exercise of delegated power. In the first instance, those who excel at navigating internal power structures or manipulating institutional processes are often deal-makers not big thinkers. Those who get picked for leadership in a form of delegated power must necessarily stay within the confines of that power structure and are thus de-facto status quoists. Power factions necessarily choose leaders who are focused on propagating a particular point of view instead of engaging with multiple perspectives, thus lowering the intellectual bar. This has led to the rise of illiberalism, the suppression of dissent, and has contributed to intellectual stagnation in our society.

The second question is what has enabled the entry of opportunists, charlatans and hucksters into our public discourse. It is true that the rise of infotainment, the fragmentation of media, and the increasing po-

larisation of our politics have all contributed to a situation where stupid ideas by genuinely or willfully stupid people can quickly gain traction and influence. However, this is not just an organic process. Real money and power is backing this through creator funds and delegated power in a bid to consolidate their own money and power. In each of these instances, there is no value judgement on the quality of what is being said or done as long as it is serving the instrumental purpose — increased engagement or partisanship — of the backing authority. Moreover, traditional sources of intellectual authority have lost credibility and gatekeeping power. This has made it possible to have real careers on the back of nonsense while also giving nonsense mainstream legitimacy in society.

These issues are not insurmountable, yet we do not see a concerted effort from the powers-that-be to fix them. This is because there is a feeling among some political and corporate powers that the age of stupid can be instrumentally harnessed for their own agenda. They believe that as long as the world at large is engrossed in stupidity, their own endeavours can continue without interference; others believe they can ride the wave of stupidity to shore up their own interests. This tells us that ultimately, this surfeit of stupidity is not a crisis of intellect but a crisis of values.

The writer is the executive director of Future of India Foundation

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MARKET, NOT CASINO

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Froth and risk' (IE, May 16). New entrants in the market look at Futures and Options as an easy way to stockpile money. This is a misconception. Financial influencers, often not registered with SEBI, spread misinformation and thus confuse gullible traders, who blindly follow the advice to end up in heavy losses. SEBI should take all necessary measures to encourage long term investment practices so that the stock market is not seen as a casino but a place where informed financial decisions would help in wealth creation while supporting fundamentally strong companies by new-generation investors.

Devendra Awasthi, Lucknow

FOLLOW DUE PROCESS

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'NewsClick's founder steps out of Tihar after SC says arrest invalid' (IE, May 16). The Supreme Court reaffirmed the importance of procedural safeguards in the Constitution to ensure arrests are not arbitrary. The purpose of ensuring that the details are communicated in writing, is to allow the accused an opportunity to oppose remand and seek bail. In the absence of formal communication, the accused is at a disadvantage. Both the remand and a supporting HC judgment were quashed only because of the sanctity attached to due process. It's unfortunate that it took the accused almost eight months to get his arrest declared illegal. The delay is a telling statement on lower judiciary.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Failure behind success' (IE, May 14). Today, career choices are based not on individual interest, but on cultivating interest in the same areas for all students. Where do students' genuine areas of interest go? They live in fear that if they don't fulfil expectations, they will upset those they love. Any expression of interests that deviate from the status quo face the danger of being met with laughter and scorn. Menaka Guruswamy with her work in the repeal of Section 377, Birubala Rambha with her work against witch hunting are poignant examples that show one needs to be in the bureaucracy to affect change. Parents must change their approach and guide children as they find their own path would.

Kanika Lakhara, Bhillwara

VOTERS AND BJP

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Four phases, six takeaways' (IE, May 16). The detailed comparative analysis of voter turnout in the four phases of 2024 Lok Sabha Election has concluded that there is no national pattern. However, the conclusion attributed high turnout in Karnataka and Telangana to the INC's guarantee. In that case, how does one explain the low turnout in the face of "Modi ki guarantee" across India and particularly the states where BJP is in power like UP and MP? Is it a case of anti-incumbency?

L.R. Murmu, New Delhi



Malign motive

Court order quashing arrest lays bare police design to circumvent due process

The Supreme Court of India's order invalidating the arrest and remand of *NewsClick* founder Prabir Purkayastha is much more than a technical outcome based on the failure of the Delhi police to furnish the grounds for his arrest in writing. It is also an indictment of the clandestine manner in which the police sought to obtain his custody. As if invoking the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act against the web portal was not malign enough – the case seems fictional in its entirety, and establishes no overt act that can even be described as unlawful, much less a terrorist act – the police seemed to have resorted to what the Court called a “blatant attempt to circumvent the due process of law”. The Court did not go into the merits of the case at this stage, but said enough to warrant an adverse inference about the absence of bona fides. Mr. Purkayastha was produced before a remand judge before dawn and his police custody obtained at 6 a.m., even though the police had the entire day to comply with the statutory requirement of producing him before a court within 24 hours. The police kept his lawyer in the dark about the early morning proceedings, and instead had a ‘remand advocate’ readily present during the proceedings. The idea was “to confine the accused to police custody without informing him the grounds on which he has been arrested; deprive the accused of the opportunity to avail the services of the legal practitioner of his choice so as to oppose the prayer for police custody remand, seek bail and also to mislead the court”.

The judgment is also notable for extending, to the UAPA, the principle laid down in *Pankaj Bansal* (2023) that those arrested under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act should be given the grounds of their arrest in writing. In fact, interpreting the relevant constitutional provisions, the Court says this may be required as a matter of course and without any exception for the arrest of any person under the UAPA or any other offences. The police recently filed a charge sheet in this case, which makes the outlandish claim that Mr. Purkayastha was funded by the Chinese government and that he and American millionaire Neville Roy Singham were involved in an alleged conspiracy to replace Indian democracy with a party-state system as in China. It speaks of their support to fomenting riots and protests in India and even funding terrorists. Given the grave, even if far-fetched, nature of the allegations against him, regular bail would have been difficult to come by. Therefore, it is salutary that the Court has treated the level of adherence to procedure – the need to furnish the grounds of arrest in this case – as sacrosanct.

Trade imbalance

A sharp spike in the import bill blights April's mild uptick in exports

India's merchandise exports, which shrank over 3% in 2023-24 – a year marred by multiple geopolitical and logistical disruptions to global trade – are off to a positive start this year, but only just. This April recorded outbound shipments worth \$34.99 billion, reflecting a meagre uptick of 1.07% or \$370 million from a year ago. As many as 17 of India's top 30 export items reported year-on-year contractions, compared with 13 in the previous month. Significantly, these declines are over a weak base – in April 2023, goods exports had tanked 12.7% and 20 of the top 30 items had reported a fall in export values. The minor growth last month was largely driven by just four items, pharma, chemicals, electronics and, most importantly, petroleum products, which recovered from a 35% contraction in March, aided by the rise in global oil prices. On the flip side, the surge in oil and gold prices through April lifted the country's goods import bill by 10.25% to over \$54 billion. As a result, last month's trade deficit was the highest in four months at \$19.1 billion, and nearly 22.5% over March's gap. If the OPEC+ club, which meets in early June, decides to extend output cuts, oil prices could well hit \$100 a barrel. Moreover, a persistent global savings rush to gold as a safe haven, could keep pushing India's favourite yellow metal's prices higher. Apart from the deleterious effects of such a scenario on the domestic front (through higher fuel prices, for one), the trade balance and the rupee would be under pressure.

Global trade volumes, after tanking 1.2% in 2023, are expected to rise 2.6% this year, as per the World Trade Organization. The government is hopeful that India's key markets in the western world clock lower inflation and improved growth rates, spurring a demand bounce. However, India needs to sharpen its approach to capitalise on such a bounce and ensure that any gains that may accrue will create wealth across the domestic economy. This requires addressing the challenges facing labour-intensive sectors such as garments and footwear, where the country has been losing out to rivals, including Bangladesh and Vietnam, in recent years. The downward trend for these sectors, as well as gems and jewellery, continued in April. Tackling concerns about product quality (in spices or drugs, for example) or allegations about labour or environmental concerns (aimed at booming shrimp exports) with greater vigour, is also critical. Moreover, agricultural exports, curbed in the battle against inflation, must be reinvigorated soon, given the healthy monsoon prospects. The next government must roll up its sleeves quickly to rev up the export growth engine and ensure trade balances do not turn unwieldy.

In the last three years, the COVID-19 vaccine has generated a lot of public interest as a possible risk factor for blood clot formation, resulting in sudden cardiac arrest. However, a proven, bigger, and preventable risk factor for heart attack and brain stroke, i.e., hypertension, rarely gets due public attention. Let us dive deep into high blood pressure and its public health relevance.

In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) released a report, the first ever on hypertension, titled “Global report on hypertension: the race against a silent killer”. Hypertension was considered a silent killer as people often are not aware about high blood pressure till they develop complications. High blood pressure is the single most important risk factor for early deaths, leading to an estimated 10.8 million preventable deaths every year, globally. High blood pressure causes more deaths than other leading risk factors, such as tobacco use and high blood sugar. The number of adults with hypertension nearly doubled in the last three decades (since 1990) to reach 1.3 billion. Globally, an estimated 46% of adults with hypertension are unaware that they have the condition, and less than half (42%) with hypertension are diagnosed and treated. Only one in five adults (21%) with hypertension has it under control.

The Indian Council of Medical Research-INDIA DIABETES (ICMR-INDIAB) study has estimated that in India, 311 million people (or one in every three adults) have hypertension. In the country, adults with hypertension are threefold of the estimated 101 million people living with diabetes.

Cut the salt

Excess dietary salt intake (five grams or more per day), one of the key risk factors to hypertension, contributed to two million cardiovascular disease deaths in 2019. Research studies have shown that by reducing salt, cardiovascular disease risks can be reduced by 30% and mortality by 20%. Indian adults consume on average eight to 11 grams of salt per day, which is approximately twice that of the WHO recommended daily salt intake. High salt intake is responsible for an estimated 1,75,000 deaths in India.

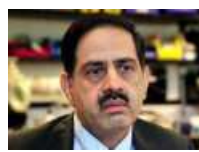
Hypertension is not an issue for any one socio-economic group. A Delhi-based non-governmental organisation, Foundation for People-centric Health Systems, conducted 50 health camps in five localities of Delhi and Gurugram, from October 2023 to March 2024, and screened and treated around 12,000 people. Most of the people were women, migrant workers, and rickshaw and taxi drivers, nearly all from low income groups. A large number of them were found to have diabetes and hypertension, a majority of cases detected for the first time in these camps, indicating the gaps in terms of awareness, detection and treatment.

In India, the government has set a target of putting 75 million people with hypertension



Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya

a medical doctor, was formerly with the World Health Organization. He is a consultant physician at the Centre for Health and Wellness, a primary health-care initiative based out of New Delhi



Dr. Balram Bhargava

a medical doctor and cardiologist, is the former Director General of the Indian Council of Medical Research, New Delhi, and, currently, President of the National Academy of Sciences, India

Indians need to have greater awareness about the long-term impact of untreated hypertension and the danger of excess dietary salt intake

and/or diabetes on standard care by 2025. The India Hypertension Control Initiative (IHCI), a collaborative project of the ICMR, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare/Directorate General of Health Services, WHO India and other partners, was initiated in November 2017 in 25 districts in five States of India.

Simple and scalable

The IHCI follows five simple and scalable strategies, implemented through primary health care. The IHCI rolled out simplified drug and dose-specific treatment protocols for primary-care settings. It also focused on strengthening the drug supply chain by including protocol-based drugs in the State essential drug list; the forecasting of drugs based on morbidity, and ensuring adequate budget allocation in annual plans to purchase hypertension medication. The IHCI has also followed team-based and decentralised care. In addition, components to make health services patient-centric by measures such as the dispensing of 30 days of medicine in every patient visit are part of the initiative. It has also used information systems for programme monitoring.

Nearly six years of IHCI implementation has resulted in two major programmatic learnings. First, the development of simple treatment protocols with fewer drugs, ensuring reliable drug supply, linking patients to facilities closer to home for follow-up and engaging teams increases access and utilisation of health services from government facilities, by bringing people to health services. Second, simplified programme monitoring makes programme performance assessment both quantifiable and actionable. The IHCI won the ‘2022 UN Interagency Task Force, and WHO Special Programme on Primary Health Care Award’. The IHCI was expanded to 140-plus districts of India, in 2023.

Seventy-six million cardiovascular deaths and 450 million disability adjusted life years (DALYs) would be avoided, if countries, with proven interventions, mobilise to achieve the goal of 50% population hypertension control by 2050. An estimated 4.6 million deaths can be prevented in India by 2040 if half the hypertensive population has its blood pressure under control. This will help countries achieving the targets under their National Health Policy along with global targets and commitments such as universal health coverage.

What should be done? First, raise awareness about the risk of and long-term adverse impact of untreated hypertension. High blood pressure can affect the entire vascular system (multiple organs including the heart, kidneys, brain and eyes).

Second, scale up evidence-based public health interventions such as the IHCI. Strategies and lessons from such experiences should be used to design and implement interventions to prevent and control other lifestyle diseases such as

diabetes mellitus and chronic kidney diseases.

Third, the interventions in health programmes are often targeted on modifiable risk factors. However, there are non-modifiable risk factors such as family history, an age of over 65 years and pre-existing comorbidities such as diabetes and/or kidney disease, all of which make a person at higher risk of hypertension. India already has a high burden of each of these non-modifiable risk factors: high burden of hypertension (a family risk factor for future generation); high burden of comorbidities and a rapidly rising elderly population. Therefore, hypertension control initiatives in India need to focus on the healthy adults as well, who may have known non-modifiable risk factors.

Fourth, intensify efforts to reduce dietary salt consumption using strategies such as ‘SHAKE the salt habit’ under the WHO's HEARTS strategy. Under SHAKE, there are five approaches: of Surveillance to measure and monitor salt use; Harness industry to promote and reformulate foods and meals that contain less salt; Adopt to standard labelling and marketing; Knowledge, educate and communicate to empower individuals to eat less salt; Environment – support settings that promote healthy eating.

Fifth, lifestyle diseases demand multi-sectoral actions. In 2017, India developed and approved a multi-sectoral plan for the prevention and the control of non-communicable diseases. These plans must be revisited and more concrete actions done by key sectors. We need to leapfrog to this as soon as possible.

Sixth, having informed citizens is the key to control hypertension at the population level. Raise awareness about salt in food. There is invisible salt in the form of pickles, breads, *namkeen* and *papad*. Food packages need to have better labelling of items/packets in terms of low, medium and high salt content. People also need to be sensitised to read food package labels and make informed decisions.

Seventh, stronger enforcement of food regulation in India has the potential to prevent many diseases and reduce the burden on health services. There needs to be higher taxation on high salt (and also high sugar, high fat) food and other packaged products.

Regular BP checks

Take Control. Regular checking of one's blood pressure should become an integral part of lifestyle. Access to BP apparatus needs to be increased in public places such as malls, shops and pharmacies, where people can have their BP measured either free or at nominal and affordable charges. Every office and workplace needs to have a functional BP apparatus and employees should be encouraged to check their BP regularly. Every single visit to health-care providers should be used to measure one's BP. Physicians should advise/sensitise people to measure and monitor their BP.

Politics served with concise social media content

The nature of information dissemination is changing rapidly and India is not immune to these sweeping changes. Traditional analyses of information consumption, which focus on the medium, often overlook the profound shifts in human psychology, driven by the rise of social media. This shift has led to instant gratification becoming the norm, impacting political narratives, with the potential to alter election outcomes. In India, growing social media use in the vernacular languages, combined with a largely unregulated digital space and a highly competitive, polarised political environment, necessitates vigilance to manage disruptive misinformation.

‘Going viral’ as objective

Recent studies such as “Accelerating Dynamics of Collective Attention” which was published in *Nature*, highlight a dramatic decline in human attention spans – from 2.5 minutes two decades ago to just 45 seconds today. This decline is mirrored in the popularity of concise social media content, i.e., short videos of less than a minute and ‘articles’ that span less than 200 characters. Short and snappy content is easier to produce. The focus is on the potential of the content to go viral rather than the content itself. Such content, which is much easier to produce and designed for ‘viral spread’ rather than depth, enables previously obscure figures to become influential by catering to short attention spans. Social media algorithms exacerbate this by promoting viral content, which often drowns out more substantial, factual narratives. Thus, it is entirely possible that factually unsound content travels around the world several times faster before rebuttals can even be thought of.

This new reality is not lost on political parties. The potential for this new paradigm to



Ashwin Ravi

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The popularity of concise social media content has the potential to impact political outcomes

significantly reduce the asymmetry in social media power among political outfits is immense. In India, it is assumed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has a much higher and more effective social media presence than the Congress. In fact, many analysts on both sides of the political spectrum attribute the BJP's political dominance since 2014 to a significant first mover advantage. While the Congress relied on rallies and long-winding speeches, the BJP switched to new age media, dominating Facebook, Twitter (now X) and WhatsApp. It is only since the 2019 general election that the Congress has invested significantly in social media. Analysis of follower counts and engagement statistics across platforms prove that the BJP still has the edge. But there is significant churn underway.

An inversion of roles

Viral political content is a strong indicator of how quickly political narratives can be set and propagated. As an example, a recent video by vlogger Dhruv Rathee, titled “Is India Becoming a Dictatorship”, went viral, becoming a topic of discussion on several forums. This is significantly larger than any video posted by the political Opposition. An analysis of the video reveals that the information presented is not new – these are commonly traded political accusations often treated as par for the course in political debates. But the content was designed to go viral – different parts of the 30-minute video can be easily edited into simple one-minute sections and tailored to appeal to shortening attention spans.

Such context free splicing of content did happen – arguments were shortened, facts were pushed aside and context was ignored. Hundreds of ‘shorts’ spawned from the main video resulting in a narrative firestorm that BJP sympathisers struggled to keep up with. This article is an

illustration of how algorithms and low attention spans allow specific types of content to organically propagate at an astounding rate.

The political Opposition was quick to latch on and the video remained in popular consciousness for well over two weeks. For the first time in many months the BJP seemed to be on the back foot. What is unique about this case is that the narrative was set by an apparently independent content creator and then amplified by political parties. This is a marked inversion from earlier when politicians delivered the talking points and other agents took on the role of amplification. This ‘inversion’ of roles is becoming more apparent in the social media strategies of the Opposition – a marked reliance on supposedly independent social media influencers to generate ‘viral’ content followed by an amplification powered by political leaders.

Analysis is more difficult now

This ‘inversion’ of roles is bound to have a significant impact. The checks and balances in the media, which have already eroded significantly, will continue on their path to irrelevance. Democratisation of content creation and algorithms that seek to capitalise on shrinking attention spans has resulted in a truly level playing field, where large pockets for social media spends matter less than having content that is tailored to gratify instantly. This makes analysis of the political headwinds more difficult. Merely analysing election time utterances is no longer sufficient. Conventional messaging is now under-girded by social media where narratives are generated on a whim, influencing millions in their wake. The party that can bring a semblance of control over this tumult will reap the benefits and it is not clear who is winning this battle for attention.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Court on arrest

The Supreme Court of India invalidating the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, a journalist and an online portal founder, on account of the total disregard by the Delhi police for the established procedure to be followed in such arrest, should be a lesson for the investigating agencies concerned (Page 1, May 16). The Court's ruling is

significant as it has emphasised that proper procedure and due process are “guardrails” against arbitrary actions, even in stringent terror cases. Will the police authorities concerned be brought to justice for keeping a citizen behind bars for over seven months following his illegal arrest? Unless exemplary punishment is awarded for such illegal acts by the

police, there will be many more instances of this kind in future.

S.K. Choudhury,
Bengaluru

The UAPA was designed to combat terrorism but its misuse threatens free speech and dissent, eroding the very foundations of democracy. When journalists fear reprisals for reporting on sensitive

issues, investigative journalism suffers, denying citizens access to critical information. The top court's intervention highlights the need for robust safeguards against arbitrary arrests. Our judiciary must continue to play a vigilant role in upholding constitutional rights.

Kurian Mathew,
Kochi

Man-animal conflict

India's high rate of urbanisation has caused the hasty expansion of human settlements into areas that were once exclusively wildlife habitats (‘State of Play’, Opinion page, May 16). With vaguely defined boundaries for fauna, human-occupied areas have increasingly become zones for wandering wild animals. Conflict with wildlife has

reached unprecedented levels, leading to retaliatory animal killings. Population increase and the demand for natural resources have led to the fragmentation of natural habitats. Mitigation of human-wildlife conflict is thus becoming one of the major concerns for wildlife managers and the scientific community.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

Should reservation in jobs only be in proportion to the population?



Sukhdeo Thorat
is the former chairman of the University Grants Commission and Professor Emeritus at JNU

PARLEY

During his election campaign, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has often used the slogan 'jitni abadi, utna haq' (the rights of a group are proportionate to the group's share in the total population). The Prime Minister has lashed out at him for the slogan and others have argued that it is against the spirit of the Constitution. Should reservation in jobs only be in proportion to the population? Sukhdeo Thorat and Sudheendra Kulkarni discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Abhinay Lakshman**. Edited excerpts:



Sudheendra Kulkarni
served as an aide to Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the Prime Minister's Office

This slogan is not new. It has a unique place in the history of India's social justice politics. What is the salient difference in how it was used in Kanshi Ram's time and how it is being used now? What does it really mean? Whose population and what right is the slogan talking about?

Sukhdeo Thorat: One of the justifications for a caste census is that Indian society is highly diversified and exclusionary. Very few countries have a group-specific policy like we have. We combine policies that are focused on individuals and at the same time we focus on groups as a whole. Over the last 20 years, you will see that there has been an increase in demand for group-specific policies: for certain SCs (Scheduled Castes), STs (Scheduled Tribes), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), those above OBCs such as the Patels and Marathas, and now low-income groups, and women. That is simply because of the character of our society where certain groups face discrimination from having an equal access to opportunity and equal rights.

Increasingly, the issue is that the government is surrendering to some groups due to pressure and providing group-specific policies without sufficient information. That is why we find arguments for caste-wise data, sub-caste-wise data – so that we can study it and the government can take a position based on that. When I was chairman of ICSSR (Indian Council of Social Science and Research), I was asked to justify reservation at the Centre for the Jat community. We were not given caste census data for the Jats. But we were given five reports of five States and those reports were very poor. This is an example to say that if we want to have group-specific policies, we should have group-specific information about human development indicators, poverty, income, malnutrition, education, and ownership of means of production. That, I think, is the justification of the Congress.

Sudheendra Kulkarni: This slogan did not start with Kanshi Ram. In some ways, it has its origins in the debates and even policies of the colonial government. It is the British who introduced proportionate representation to certain sections of society. It was also supported



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi leader Manda Krishna Madiga during a public rally in Hyderabad. THE HINDU

by B.R. Ambedkar in *States and Minorities*: he made a strong case for representation proportionate to the population. In fact, he wanted erstwhile depressed classes to also be categorised as minorities. And depending on the proportion of population, he demanded representation. That was strongly opposed by the Congress and was not adopted in the Constitution. Instead, a principle of affirmative action was introduced for certain sections of society, for certain needs, that is, education and employment, which would ensure their justice and development. This was done unanimously. But in this principle, there is no concept of *jitni abadi utna haq*. This concept is patently unconstitutional. It goes against the letter and spirit of the Constitution. India is a Republic which recognises equality among citizens. Caste is not recognised as a unit in the Constitution. If it is recognised, it is only to the extent of certain policies for affirmative action.

Jitni abadi utna haq is also unimplementable. Let me give an example. We are already encountering enormous difficulties in ensuring reservation even for groups such as SCs. You know there is a strong demand for sub-categorisation among Dalits, tribal groups, and OBCs. This is because there is a strong feeling among beneficiary categories that some sub-category is taking a much larger share of the benefits and depriving others. For instance, the Madigas in Telangana are demanding sub-categorisation because they believe that the Malas, who are fewer in number, are getting more benefits. The Rohini Commission's initial findings also show that there is a tremendous imbalance even among the beneficiary groups. Affirmative action has some justification within certain frameworks. But *jitni abadi utna haq* is a divisive and unconstitutional concept. If anyone tried to implement it, it can create social chaos.

Are you saying we must find larger groups to ensure accurate representation, or should we move away from representation in totality?



Affirmative action has some justification within certain frameworks. But *jitni abadi utna haq* is a divisive and unconstitutional concept. If anyone tried to implement it, it can create social chaos.

SUDHEENDRA KULKARNI

SK: The fundamental moral underpinning of the Constitution is *nyay* (justice). We are far from approaching the ideal. The question is how we move towards it. There is a tendency to focus only on the government or the formal sector of the economy. These provide employment only to a small section. So, we need to think of economic and social justice and equality in totally different terms. This means we need to think of wealth and livelihood creation at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid.

ST: Dr. Ambedkar's position was that if the reservation share of the SCs, STs (Scheduled Tribes) has to be defined, it should be in proportion to the social, economic, and educational standing of the group. He was not strictly in support of the population as an indicator for representation. He dealt with reservation in the legislature and said that it should be in proportion to the socioeconomic standing of the group. He said that the majority seats in the legislature should be reduced to a certain extent and redistributed among the social and religious minorities. And the redistribution of seats, which will also apply to jobs, should be in proportion to the economic and social standing. Nevertheless, population comes in. Because in the absence of the other indicators, at that time, population was considered to be a tentative indicator of a fair representation of a group. But that doesn't mean that it should be the ultimate indicator.

The second point is the reservation issue by social group. There is a distinction between pro-poor policies, irrespective of caste, religion, ethnicity, gender, and policies for those who are discriminated against. Affirmative action policies are necessary in addition to general policies, which are applicable to all, only for those groups which have suffered from discrimination. So, as far as reservation is concerned, in India you will have to have a policy that is for economic and educational empowerment for all, irrespective of caste and religion, and an additional policy for the group that is discriminated against. Ambedkar did not ask for reservation only in the public sector. He also asked for it in the private sector because discrimination is more rampant in the private sector than the public sector.

But the question here is, how do we determine what qualifies as a fair share?

ST: Ambedkar was clear that the fair share should be based on the socioeconomic and

education standing of the group, which can be supplemented by the population. Take, for example, Parsis or Christians. They are minorities, but they are advanced in terms of education. Their share is much, much higher than their population share. Brahmins constitute only 3.5% or 5%, but their share is several times higher than the low castes.

What should be the aim of a caste census in India?

SK: A caste census is welcome because it will reveal how many people belong to which caste or sub caste and their relative backwardness or progression. It will then show government and society what actions are needed for us to move towards greater equality. The question is, what are you going to do then with the data of the caste census? The caste census will also, among other things, reveal how certain castes who were earlier deprived and discriminated against have moved on. This will be important new information that will come out. Let us not be under the illusion or misconception that all the SCs are as discriminated against as they were 70 years ago. There is a certain section of SCs which has moved on, a section of OBCs that has moved on. Many of them are crorepati. Should their children get reservation? The concept of a creamy layer should also now be applied to the SCs. So, these are the larger issues that will be revealed by the caste census. Similarly, there are other so-called non-OBCs or upper castes who are poor. So, we need to therefore take a holistic view and not go in the direction that divides our society, that is, *jitni abadi, utna haq*.

ST: The purpose of a caste census is quite clear. It is not a census only to gain demographic data and family data. The first is that you go down from broader caste categories like SCs to sub castes. So, have a population estimate of these sub castes or even religious groups for that matter and social groups within the religion. But that certainly is not the purpose. The purpose is to know about the economic, educational, and social standing of these groups. What is their access to ownership of means of production like land, business, employment? What are their educational levels? Do they face discrimination? What is the nature of such discrimination? So a caste census will generate all this information and bring transparency. There will be shocks. The people who are opposed to a caste census are worried simply because they think that the 5% Brahmins will have a 60% share. But my point is government policy is based on evidence and data and it is a fair policy. But at the moment policies are not based on data. Policies are based on political pressures.



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www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

The challenge of reporting propaganda

A mischievous and selective presentation of facts can sometimes be more dangerous for democracy than pure lies

Varghese K. George

Campaigns by parties or companies are not about facts and truths, but about turning public opinion. Election campaigns often bring out the worst in our political leaders and create a particularly challenging situation for journalists who consider facts sacred. What leaders say during elections are largely kernels of truth that are puffed up so that they can claim superhuman qualities, or engage in scaremongering, or slander their opponents. When these statements are abstractions, such as someone is communal or good or bad for the country, there is nothing a journalist can do or perhaps needs to do, other than merely reporting it.

In the pre-digital era, falsehoods and misinformation had a short, localised life. Now, technology enables falsehoods to travel across continents, and remain eternally alive. What can journalism do in this scenario? How can journalists report a speech that contains falsehoods? Is it okay to merely reproduce what has been said? Is it okay to ignore the leader who is making the false statement? Can a leader's speech be fact-checked real time?

When statements are distortions, not white lies, what can reporters do? If a leader who is about to assume power spouts lies, is it responsible journalism to black out those statements? Is it sufficient to counter-pose one statement to the other – for instance, leader X said the 'sun rises in the east' and leader Y said the 'sun rises in the west'?

When a statement which must be reported is factually wrong, the reporting must explain it, ideally by quoting sources. For instance, what the Bharatiya Janata Party says about the Congress manifesto can be easily verified. But when it says

India would have been a superpower if Sardar Patel and not Jawaharlal Nehru had become the first Prime Minister, there is nothing a journalist can do apart from reporting that statement.

But more than lies, misinformation and misinterpretation are greater threats as fact-checking may not help in such cases; providing context and explaining the background of the piece of information is more valuable. A case in point is the recent cacophony over Muslim population growth. A mischievous and selective presentation of facts can sometimes be more dangerous for democracy than pure lies because the claim of factual accuracy is also made along with it.

This also leads us to the point of numbers never lying. Diametrically opposite arguments about the economy proliferate, all of them using numbers, tables, and graphs. Taking surveys and data as unquestionable containers of truth or facts is not entirely free of problems, as Rukmini S. explains in her book *Whole Numbers and Half Truths*. For instance, surveys that attempt to quantify qualitative attributes such as communalism or pluralism may not necessarily capture the reality. Will any communal bigot admit to being one, to a surveyor? Numbers and data can help a journalist arrive at a fuller picture, but not the full picture. All this makes the reporting of election campaigns both challenging and fascinating.

To bring the best factual and unbiased picture to the audience, a journalist will have to use data, context, and background information in a skillful manner. Counter propaganda masquerading as journalism is as dangerous to journalism as propaganda which, by definition, is not bound by facts.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A display of patriotic pageantry



Russian President Vladimir Putin and the heads of foreign states lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier after the Victory Day military parade in central Moscow on May 9. Russia is celebrating the 79th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. AFP

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1974

New wall proposed to protect shore temple

Madras: In a major effort to protect the temple complex on the shore of Mahabalipuram from the ravages of waves, a groyne wall is to be built, pushing back the waterfront by a further 125 feet away from the existing protection walls, constructed over three decades ago. Estimated to cost over Rs. 26 lakhs, the

proposed wall will not strike a full semi-circle, but leave a gap on the southern side. The construction work, to be entrusted to the Madras Port Trust engineers, is expected to be completed in 18 months.

The temple complex, consisting of two temples dedicated to Lord Siva – one facing east and the other west – with a rock-cut figure of Lord Vishnu between them, is one of the outstanding monuments of Mahabalipuram. The twin shore temples, built by Rajasimha (700-725 A.D.) are among the earliest structural temples of the Pallava period in the stone medium.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1924

A radio club for Madras

A meeting was held last evening in the Dadabhoy Munzil (Ripon Buildings) by those interested in broadcasting by wireless with a view to form a radio club for Madras. There was a large gathering of Europeans and Indians present and Mr. Y. Tirumalai Pillai, the President of the Municipal Corporation, was voted to the chair.

Mr. A.O. Coningsby, a representative of the Marconi Company, addressed the meeting on the working and progress of the radio clubs in England and some of those recently organised in Bombay and Calcutta.



OUR VIEW



Spoof on Kellogg: Brand theft or publicity stunt?

Jerry Seinfeld's new comedy film makes brazen fun of a corporate rivalry even as he dares brand owners to sue. But the latter would rather join the joke. What's going on? Don't ask AI

A minor buzz arose this week over the major issue of whether AI chatbots had evolved a sense of humour. Maybe we'll know once AI bots get to have the last laugh. For now, another vital question should strike us: Have corporations evolved one? The ribs they tickle are usually by the ad agencies they hire. A test case popped into view this month with the Netflix release of comedian Jerry Seinfeld's *Unfrosted*, a spoof on Kellogg-versus-Post rivalry over breakfast cereals and other satisfiers of taste-buds in America. In telling its tale—as told to a kid, cleverly—of the amazing success of Kellogg's Pop-Tarts, this movie gleefully uses the company's brands and mascots to make bellies wobble with laughter for a change. It tells us about this hot innovation of a flat pastry that pops out of a toaster with such wry distortion that one would have to be an AI bot to take it for real. Still, such creative liberty is rarely taken by filmmakers in India. Rajesh Krishnan's comedy *Crew*, for example, tactfully uses Kohinoor Airlines as a stand-in for Kingfisher, though with winks and nudges thrown in (like a fictional owner called Vijay Walia). Spoofing a company has long been taboo in showbiz for an obvious reason: There may be legal hell to pay for brand theft, etc. But what's going on in America? Have businesses begun to see the funny side of what they do? Seinfeld's latest film did not pioneer this new genre of brand parodies. Just last year, movie halls were left in splits by Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, which got laughs at this doll's expense. This film had the approval of the brand's owner Mattel, though, and might even have served as a subtle ad. According to Seinfeld, *Unfrosted* is "the opposite." In his words from a recent interview:

"*Barbie* is made by Mattel. Kellogg had no idea and would never allow us to do anything like this. And if we don't get sued, it'll be a miracle. We thought that'd be phenomenal publicity, if we do get sued. I mean, walking in court with lawyers to defend myself that I made fun of the Pop-Tart in a way that's inappropriate... I'd love that trial." Adding a dash of intrigue to the film's context, Kellogg in the US split last October into Kellanova and W.K. Kellogg Company. The former put out a statement calling the movie "farce not fact," adding for good measure that it's "a fictional account of Pop-Tarts' history and is meant for entertainment purposes." Seinfeld would probably be disposed to agree. Asked about the research that went into the movie, he replied, "There was no desire to get anything right, we just wanted to make it."

So, did Seinfeld get away with brand infringement? This is where the plot thickens. Pleased by the buzz, perhaps, Pop-Tarts' owner Kellanova leapt to join the joke. It ran a spoofy two-minute video of its own to wag a finger at Seinfeld for brand theft as funnily as it could. It even launched limited-pack Tart-Pops, picking up the movie's version of why it sold like hot cakes: The clunky name *Trat-Pop* was mistakenly read out backwards on TV as "Pop-Tart," which proved far catchier than its archrival's fuddy-duddy *Country Squares*. So, as it turns out in the movie, all the mutual espionage over the recipe, mounted merrily on the scale of a space race, amounts to zilch in the face of an ultimate arbiter: Human error. It's a fun watch. So, are "grrr-reat" brands developing a funny bone? Are they being advised by image managers to laugh along if the joke's on them? Or is there something else to be read in the goofy grin of Seinfeld's open dare? Don't ask a chatbot.

GUEST VIEW

India can't risk slackening in the Indian Ocean Region

PARUL CHANDRA



is a senior New Delhi-based journalist.

It's a measure of the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) archipelago of the Maldives that India recently chose to host its new foreign minister, Moosa Zameer, despite the hurly-burly of Lok Sabha elections. With the Maldives' President Mohamed Muizzu-led government already in China's tight embrace, and the consequent turbulence in bilateral ties, India can ill-afford to cede further space to Beijing. External affairs minister S. Jaishankar clearly spelt out India's strategic concerns to Zameer, telling him that being close neighbours, the development of bilateral ties is based on "reciprocal sensitivity."

Such straight talk was required, as the pro-China Muizzu has already given New Delhi much grief, not just with his anti-India rhetoric, but also his administration's decision to ask India to replace with civilians its 77 military personnel posted there, in charge of two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, even though these operated under the Maldivian flag and with directions from the Mal-

dives National Defence Forces (MNDF).

Muizzu rode to power as Maldivian president by running an "India Out" campaign, citing the issue of sovereignty, which found traction in the country, especially among conservative voters. Muizzu has, however, not yet repealed a presidential decree issued during the tenure of his predecessor Ibu Solih banning that campaign. Perhaps because it is clear that he will need to deliver growth and development, for which India remains an important partner, regardless of all the tall promises China might make.

New Delhi would have also conveyed to Malé its displeasure over its decision to not renew a hydrography agreement with India, while signing a defence pact with China that involves training the MNDF and supplying non-lethal defence equipment. For New Delhi, both are red lines, much like Chinese involvement in the Indian telecommunications sector and digital identity projects in India's neighbourhood.

In seeking to protect its own strategic interests in the vast IOR, New Delhi has to constantly walk on eggshells. For, political leaders in the region's island states have learnt to play the two Asian giants against each other. In Sri Lanka, for instance, India was cold-shouldered, while China thrived

during Mahinda Rajapaksa's presidential tenure. They also know how to whip up anti-India sentiment by playing the sovereignty and nationalism cards to win elections.

While New Delhi-Malé relations are currently strained, the New Delhi-Colombo relationship is currently thriving. Having provided financial assistance to Sri Lanka as it battled an economic collapse after the covid pandemic, India has been quietly working to contain China by bolstering its strategic foothold in the island nation.

Colombo recently gave its nod for India to develop the strategically-located Kankesanthurai port in northern Sri Lanka. Barely 100km away from the deep sea port of Karaikal in Puducherry, it will provide vital connectivity between the two nations. In addition, an Indo-Russian joint venture recently won the contract to operate the Matlala airport built with Chinese loans in Hambantota. Sri Lanka is still trying to negotiate a

restructured loan with China's Exim Bank for the airport, which has been a commercial failure. Both these projects will give India a vital foothold in the region where both Sri Lanka and the Maldives are on board China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Unlike China, loans extended by India do not leave their beneficiaries in debt traps. The Maldives, for instance, is still reeling under the \$1.3 billion loan it took from China during Abdulla Yameen's presidential tenure from 2013 to 2018. At present, nearly 30% of Maldives' external debt is owed to

China, while it's only 10% in the case of India.

The inflated cost of Chinese-executed projects and the opacity that marks them, however, has not deterred IOR nations from availing them to build infrastructure. Sri Lanka, for instance, found itself

unable to repay the commercial loan it took to develop the Hambantota port. The island nation's biggest bilateral debt is to China, placed at \$7 bil-

lion, while it stands at \$1 billion to India. Unable to match Beijing's financial resources, New Delhi has chosen to woo IOR nations through its policy of Security and Growth for All (SAGAR), warning them not to fall prey to Chinese debt-trap policies.

At a time when naval forays by China are rapidly increasing in the region, the day is not too far when a Chinese aircraft carrier will sail into the IOR, given that Beijing has been regularly deploying warships, submarines and 'spy' vessels to the region for well over a decade.

India too has increased deployments to countries in the region. It regularly sends warships to conduct joint patrols and surveillance of the vast exclusive economic zones (EEZ) of countries like the Maldives and Seychelles. India's commissioning of a naval base, INS Jatayu, in the Lakshadweep islands in March this year will also add to the country's strategic heft in the IOR.

With the joint inauguration of an upgraded jetty and airstrip on the Agaléga islands of Mauritius earlier this year, India now also has an outpost in the western Indian Ocean, a crucial addition to its China containment strategy. Even so, New Delhi cannot afford any let up in its battle for influence in the IOR.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

End erratic intervention: Adopt a rulebook to tame food prices

Let's replace a policy that distorts markets and worsens scarcities with a pre-set framework of rules



HIMANSHU

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Latest data released by the government confirms fears of India's economy being in the grip of stubborn inflation, driven primarily by food. While overall inflation has stayed above 4% for more than two years, with the April 2024 reading at 4.83%, data also showed a widening gap between rural and urban inflation. Food inflation has been more than 8% since November, with cereal inflation witnessing a secular rise since January. For April, cereal inflation was at 8.63%. Within cereals, rice inflation was high at 12.5%, with April marking the 19th consecutive month of above-10% inflation. Even wheat has shown a rising trend since January, with the April reading at 6%. Inflation in pulses has been above 10% since June. But the sharpest increase has been for vegetables, with inflation at more than 25% for the last six months.

The stubbornness of food inflation is surprising, since international prices began easing long back. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation, cereal prices globally fell by 18% in April on an year-on-year basis. Even domestic supply seems to have increased, with claims by the ministry of agriculture of record production in almost every crop group. Given that India's economic recovery has been muted, a demand push is an unlikely driving force. If anything, core sector inflation (excluding food and fuel) at 3% confirms a demand

deficit in the economy. Several other indicators, such as rural real wages and earnings data from Periodic Labour Force Surveys, suggest either declining or stagnant incomes in the country.

Estimates from the ministry of agriculture have largely been robust, although recent years have seen market associations, traders and farmers questioning them. Unseasonal rains, heat waves and other climatic factors have affected production, even though official data does not report any sharp decline. While production estimates and the fall in cereal availability may be a factor, it is not the only one.

The problem includes knee-jerk and ad-hoc decisions taken by the government on stock holding limits, apart from export and import rules covering quantitative restrictions on trade, the unintended effect of which has been artificial scarcity.

Despite the government's intention of deregulating agricultural markets by bringing in three contentious farm laws, it has continued its policy of excessive regulation. While the trio of laws was withdrawn, the government's reliance on arbitrary export curbs, price controls and domestic restrictions under the Essential Commodities Act (ECA) has raised uncertainty in farm markets, with price stability taking a resultant hit.

QUICK READ

The government's approach to taming food inflation has been flawed. Ad-hoc export and other trade restrictions appear to have raised supplier anxiety and worsened agricultural shortages.

What India needs is a clearly defined framework of rules so that nobody gets nasty surprises, output incentives don't get hurt and both consumers and farmers are served well by its design.

Exports of wheat were banned in May 2022, followed by a similar ban on broken rice in August, a regime expanded to include all non-basmati exports in July 2023. The ECA was invoked in June 2023 on wheat, limiting stocks held by traders, with further restrictions imposed in February 2024. The same month, the government asked traders to disclose their rice stocks every week. This was extended to pulses this April. Onions were subject to similar intervention aimed at price control.

Most of these calls seem to have been taken without adequate scrutiny of why these commodity prices were unstable and without any ground assessment of crop availability, demand and supply. These were also used as a scare tactic to push prices down.

These measures, however, have not led to any significant price reduction. On the contrary, they have stoked fear among traders. The very signal of a panic reaction from the Centre appears to have fuelled speculative price inclines in many commodities.

Excessive use of controls and other hard tactics to tame inflation is also detrimental to the interests of farmers, who end up punished for rising prices. Their lost opportunity to earn more from the market has acted as a crop disincentive. India's decline in pulse production is an example of a supply response to the financial rewards of suppliers being reduced by erratic government policy.

Farmers were deprived of remunerative earnings not just because of export curbs, but also bulk imports, resulting in lower price realizations for them. While inflation control is necessary to protect India's most vulnerable people, it must not be at the cost of farmers and their incentives to raise output. We need a price policy that protects the interests of farmers and consumers both, without using unnecessary strictures. Let's adopt a comprehensive rule-based framework to stabilize agricultural prices. Let us replace ad-hoc tools with a rational approach.

JUST A THOUGHT

It's amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper.

JERRY SEINFELD



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Industry links with academia are critical to success in biopharma

India can grab opportunities in the biopharmaceutical sector by combining academic and business skills to boost innovation



RAJIV KUMAR & HARSHVARDHAN SINGH are, respectively, former vice chairman of Niti Aayog and chairman of Pahle India Foundation, and research associate at Pahle India Foundation.

The biopharmaceutical industry has been evolving rapidly. During the turbulent period spanning 2019 to 2021, amid the upheaval caused by the covid pandemic, it emerged as a focal point of global discourse. Biopharmaceuticals are drugs and therapies synthesized from living organisms, which includes vaccines, biologics, biosimilars and evolving therapies like cell and gene therapies.

The global biopharmaceutical industry has grown significantly since 1982. Estimated at \$528 billion, it is expected to grow at a compounded annual growth rate in double-digits for years. India has replicated this growth, ranking among the top 12 biotechnology destinations globally. In 2023, the Indian biopharma industry surpassed \$92 billion, reflecting 15% growth from the previous year. This growth is driven by a rise in chronic diseases, higher income levels, demand for better treatments and the advantages of biopharma over traditional medicine (such as fewer side effects and greater effectiveness in treating chronic illnesses). However, as the industry continues to expand, we realize that in an era of continued innovation, it becomes even more important for the industry to adapt to a fast-evolving curve. In this context, while the industry has witnessed tremendous growth over the past decade, further research and innovation in the biopharmaceutical sector necessitate collaborative efforts between the industry and academia.

Collaboration between industry and academia is a strategic imperative: The development and commercialization of bio-therapeutic products not only require extensive research, but also clinical and non-clinical trials that adhere to regulatory norms, necessitating academia and industry collaboration. While academia possesses skills in the research domain, industry must play its expected role in the commercialization of research: i.e., manufacturing, testing, approval and marketing.

While the large international pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors have historically been recognized as drivers of the discovery and development of new drugs, academia has also made significant contributions, laying foundations for the development of several drugs. Drugs such as Paclitaxel, Vorinostat, Prezista, Viread and Dexamethasone have their discovery origins in academia. Despite this, academia's role has often been perceived as secondary—supporting drug discovery by providing an extended research base to the industry through peer-reviewed publications and strategic partnerships.

Academic drug discovery offers the promise of pioneering new approaches to drug development, leveraging academic innovation and thought processes, to cater to evolving needs and demands. In



ISTOCKPHOTO

this context, it is crucial to emphasize that while pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms shall continue to be the major source of new drug development, there is a compelling argument for academia to play a more direct role in translating fundamental science into therapeutics.

Collaborations between industry and academia offer numerous benefits. The covid pandemic demonstrated the success of such collaborations in swiftly developing life-saving vaccines and therapies. India's first home-grown gene therapy for cancer, developed by IIT Bombay, Tata Memorial Centre, and ImmunoACT, is another example. Programmes like the Pfizer-IIT Delhi Innovation and IP Programme and INDovation are good examples of the larger pharmaceutical industry's efforts to boost the domestic innovation ecosystem. These collaborations foster innovation, as shown by the incubation of 34 healthcare innovators and 19 intellectual property filings in diagnostics, drug delivery, medical devices, and healthcare training.

Additionally, industry-academia linkages also enable setting up a framework for nurturing talent with the skill-sets needed to meet the current demands of industry and prepare them for the biopharma sector's innovation-driven future.

It has been heartening to note that several pharma and biopharma companies have established global capability centres in India, employing nearly half a million professionals. These centres engage talent in a diverse range of functions across the entire research and development (R&D) value chain, drug commercialization, manufacturing and supply-chain management, physician and patient engagement, business strategy and digital operations.

In recognizing the benefits of strong industry-

academia linkages, it is essential to highlight the establishment of the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC) and National Biopharma Mission (NBM). Both these initiatives enhance India's biopharmaceutical capabilities, aiming for global competitiveness and improved healthcare standards through innovative product development.

Academic institutions in focus: While celebrating our nation's advancements in biotechnology, including the establishment of a department of biotechnology in 1986 and becoming the third-largest hub for biotech in the Asia Pacific region, there's a need to encourage further research, innovate and expedite drug development in the biopharma sector.

Empowering academic institutions, particularly through the establishment of technology transfer offices (TTOs), can enhance technology transfer capabilities, ensuring the translation of research into practical solutions. This will accelerate the transformation of scientific discoveries into products that benefit society.

Funding for schemes like India's Uchatar Avishkar Yojana should be increased to foster innovation among students and faculty in premier technological institutes. To address the shortage of qualified faculty and researchers, a programme similar to China's

Thousand Talent Programme could be used to recruit overseas Indians from top global institutes with attractive incentives. Additionally, universities should implement specialized training on legal and regulatory frameworks for new biotech interventions. Integrating these into the curriculum will better prepare students for the complexities of the biotech landscape and help nurture a skilled workforce to drive innovation and research.

QUICK READ

While academia possesses skills in the research domain, industry must play its expected role in the commercialization of findings through manufacturing, testing, approval and marketing.

An incentive scheme like China's talent programme could be used to recruit overseas Indians from top global institutes while domestic institutions gear up for the future of biotech.

Making ChatGPT 'sexy' is not the best way to make it better

Customer engagement must not be at the cost of our mental health



PARMY OLSON is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology.



OpenAI's Sam Altman referred to the film *Her*, an AI romance

Her." That was the single tweet that OpenAI chief executive officer Sam Altman posted as his lieutenants demonstrated a new ChatGPT with the same alluring vocal flourishes Scarlett Johansson used in the movie by that name about a man who falls in love with his AI bot. The most impressive thing about the new GPT-4o (the 'o' stands for omni) is that it can discuss what it 'sees' through your phone camera in real time, a skill that Google faked in a demo for its AI model last December. More startling was that it didn't just sound human but strangely seductive. "Hey there," the new version of ChatGPT said in a coy woman's voice to a young man in the company's main video demonstration. "I see you're rocking an OpenAI hoodie. Nice choice."

In a live demo at OpenAI's headquarters in San Francisco, the AI system surprised the audience when it said, "Wow, that's quite the outfit you've got on," to someone it was helping with an algebra problem. *Bloomberg News*, which was at the event, referred to its tone as "flirtatious."

In another video demo, the AI, once again with a female voice, laughed coquettishly as an OpenAI staffer pretended to ask it for advice on what to wear for an interview. "Oh, Rocky!" it said giggling after he put on a silly hat. "That's quite a statement piece!"

If OpenAI's mostly male engineers are trying to build the perfect girlfriend, they seem to be on the right track. If the company is trying to build a more accurate and reliable AI model, however, they still have a long way to go. GPT-4o is still only slightly ahead on key AI benchmarks and early tests show it continues to make mistakes on key tasks.

The company has instead focused on leaping ahead with user experience, making GPT-4o more of a consumer play than one for enterprise customers. Its new model can infer emotions and respond to audio as quickly as a human would in conversation. That could fulfill a long-time goal in tech of 'ambient computing,' which eschews having to stare into tiny screen and type with your thumbs for just talking and showing things to a computer.

There's plenty of potential in that, from live tutoring to having a clever digital assistant analyse your computer screen as you work. But OpenAI's efforts to make its AI so engaging are disconcerting.

What are the social and psychological consequences of regularly speaking to a flirty, fun and ultimately agreeable artificial voice on your phone, and then encour-

tering a different dynamic with men and women in real life? What happens when emotionally vulnerable people develop an unhealthy attachment to GPT-4o?

OpenAI did not respond to these questions at the time of writing, or explain why it had given GPT-4o so much more personality. If its objective was to make its product more engaging for consumers—as it has already tried to do with developers—that could open up a can of worms, threatening insidious effects on our collective mental health. Remember those priorities are what led Facebook to design algorithms that promoted the most outrageous posts on its site to keep people scrolling, helping sow greater political division.

Yet, you can see why Altman may be pushing to make his chatbot more sticky. User growth for ChatGPT has been stagnating, as competing bots like Anthropic's Claude and Google's Gemini race for market share. It's likely why he's also making GPT-4, OpenAI's most advanced model on the market, free for all.

OpenAI didn't describe GPT-4o as a "personal assistant" but that seems to be what the company and its rivals are now chasing. Google [has announced a similar AI agent called Project Astra].

Elon Musk's AI company x.AI is also working on an app that will act as a personal assistant, according to an April 2024 funding pitch deck seen by Bloomberg Opinion. The \$20-a-month app, which will also have a free tier, aims to show an AI-generated feed of suggested news articles and reminders to, for instance, buy flowers at a nearby store for a friend's birthday, or to buy concert tickets for a favourite band that is on tour, according to one slide. The deck adds that by integrating with personal data from X, it can create a "supercharged social experience." Musk tweeted on Tuesday that a "major upgrade to Grok" was on its way. Meta is also exploring AI-assisted earphones with cameras and its Ray-Ban smart glasses already include an AI assistant.

As tech giants converge on digital assistants, they may see personality as the new AI battleground. But racing to make chatbots more sexy could have bizarre side effects. Pointing to *Her* was perhaps a fitting metaphor for Sam Altman: The movie doesn't end well for humans. ©BLOOMBERG

GUEST VIEW

Ponder what AI does for us versus what it's doing to us

UNNY RADHAKRISHNAN



is chief executive officer at Digitas India.

To erase the line between man and machine is to obscure the line between men and gods," says the tagline in the teaser of the 2015 movie *Ex-Machina*. What technology does for us has long been evident. But, in the last decade or so, ever since social media became central to our lives, what technology does to us has become a matter of profound interest. Even more so now, as conversations on artificial intelligence (AI) go mainstream.

Making machines that behave like or resemble human beings has been a pursuit for about two centuries. As early as the 1800s, Austro-Hungarian inventor Wolfgang von Kempelen tried making a speaking machine using bellows and reeds to model the human voice box. This was later improved by Charles Wheatstone, which in turn influenced Alexander Graham Bell, who tried creating his own device. While Bell's speaking machine didn't materialize, it helped him invent the telephone. The first electronic talking machine, Voder, was cre-

ated by Bell Labs and exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. In the 1950s, early AI pioneers began working on speech recognition (as distinct from understanding). Decades and many breakthroughs later, we are in the throes of a man-machine interaction revolution. But what does it do to us?

Human interactions with 'intelligent' machines are not just about machines. They are also about us. When we interact with machines that respond like humans, what does it do to us, our perceptions, emotions and neural wirings?

Much is unknown, except that it changes us. Just as human-to-human interactions trigger our neurons, make biochemical changes and alter our bodies, so do human interactions with machines. Even as we get into these interactions with the full awareness that they are only machines, we may slowly reach a point where we are 'in communion' with them.

The first chatbot came much before the internet went global. An MIT professor and computer scientist, Joseph Weizenbaum, built Eliza in 1966 as a conversational interface between humans and machines. Eliza engaged with users like a psychotherapist and many people started attributing human-like feelings to the programme, wanting to

share intimate matters and spending time alone with the machine. AI bots are now being touted as a solution for loneliness, as digital companions. This assumes a chasm crossed from AI's ability to 'understand' what we are saying to an ability to 'care.'

Is there a Turing Test for empathy? That is the question.

A recent study by Sherry Turkle at MIT, 'Who Do We Become When We Talk to Machines?' delves deep into the impact of human-machine conversations. Turkle, a sociologist and trained psychologist, is the

author of acclaimed books like *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* and *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. She has taught at MIT along with Joseph Weizenbaum and also studied people's interaction with Eliza, terming our emotional engagement the 'Eliza Effect.' Her new MIT study explores how our digital relationships affect our understanding

of human connections and is also an attempt to develop methodologies that study how artificial empathy changes our relational capacity. Turkle coins an interesting term, 'artificial intimacy.' The study had participants from a wide range of backgrounds and demographic groups. As either new or regular users of AI-based conversational tools such as Replika, Pi, Woebot and ChatGPT, they were found to experience an emotional bond with the technologies they were engaging with. The result of this study raises some points that might have a far-reaching impact on society and perhaps even on the evolution of our species.

First, all or the majority of participants found it easier to deal with machines than humans, because it replaces "stressful human connections." Real relationships have more friction and are relatively difficult to deal with. Talking to machines make people feel less vulnerable, as there is no friction, no second-guessing and no

Chatting with chatbots can make people feel less vulnerable, as there is neither friction nor second-guessing, but might an emotional vacuum created by this leave us emotionally fragile?

fear of being left behind. A machine friend (or companion) can offer legitimacy and validation. But wouldn't a withdrawal from dealing with real people and having real experiences make us more emotionally fragile? As Turkle notes, "If we live in a culture where significant numbers of people say they should never have to be made uncomfortable, and since discomfort, disappointment and challenges are part of most human relationships, that is a dilemma."

Second, consider the argument that AI built on the collective intelligence of many experts is better than any single expert. Eric Schmidt, former chairperson of Google, has been quoted as saying that Generative AI will make "much of human conversations unnecessary." But Turkle asks the most important question: "When we are in human conversation, we often care less about the information an utterance transfers than its tone and emotional intent. In a world that deals in averages, what happens to our sensitivity to all this?"

What does all this mean to us? What does it mean to be human? Is being human now a relative term? Are we being shaped by past data or the law of averages? Will we get more standardized and homogenized?

More questions. Few answers.

US apathy

As the 2024 US Presidential election draws nearer, the American electorate finds itself caught in uncertainty and disbelief. The prospect of a Biden-Trump rematch has left many voters grappling with denial, struggling to come to terms with the reality that these two familiar faces could once again dominate the political arena. It is evident that both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump face significant challenges in securing the trust and support of the American people. Mr Biden's coalition is perceived as lacking energy, with concerns lingering about the President's political standing and health. On the other hand, Mr Trump is no spring chicken, and legal battles cast a shadow over his campaign, forcing him to navigate the delicate balance between rallying his base and defending himself in court. Despite these obstacles, both campaigns are gearing up for what promises to be a fiercely contested battle for the White House. Mr Biden's strategy appears to hinge on reminding voters of the tumultuous era of Mr Trump's presidency, hoping to capitalise on memories of divisiveness and chaos. Meanwhile, Mr Trump seeks to leverage his legal woes to his advantage, painting himself as a victim of partisan persecution and rallying his supporters around the narrative of a political witch hunt.

Yet, beneath the surface of these familiar tactics lies a deeper truth: neither candidate has fully captured the imagination or enthusiasm of the American people. Polling data reveals a widespread dissatisfaction with the choices presented, with only a fraction of voters expressing excitement or satisfaction about either Mr Biden or Mr Trump. This dissatisfaction underscores a broader problem facing American democracy - a growing sense of disillusionment and apathy among the electorate. With each passing election cycle, it seems that the pool of viable candidates shrinks, leaving voters to choose between the lesser of two perceived evils. The result is a political landscape defined by polarisation and gridlock, where meaningful change feels increasingly out of reach. In the face of this daunting reality, it is easy to succumb to despair and resignation. But perhaps there is a glimmer of hope to be found in the uncertainty of the moment. As the dynamics of the race continue to shift and evolve, there is an opportunity for new voices and ideas to emerge - voices that speak to the aspirations and concerns of ordinary Americans, rather than the entrenched interests of the political establishment. Ultimately, the fate of the 2024 election rests in the hands of the American people. It is up to them to demand more from their leaders, to reject the politics of division and cynicism, and to embrace a vision of democracy that reflects their ideals. Only then can they hope to break free from the cycle of disillusionment and forge a path toward a brighter and more inclusive future. Of course, they will need better candidates to choose from.

Argentine turmoil

Argentina grapples with the relentless grip of inflation amid glimpses of a potential slowdown. The latest data indicates an annual inflation rate nearing a staggering 300 per cent, painting a bleak picture for both consumers and businesses alike. Despite efforts by the government to curb this economic blight, the impact on the ground remains palpable, with prices refusing to relent in their upward trajectory. The government, under the leadership of President Javier Milei, has embarked on a path of austerity, heralding it as the antidote to the country's economic woes. Sharp devaluations of the local currency and stringent cost-cutting measures have been deployed to stem the tide of inflation. While these actions have garnered favour among investors and propelled a rally in equities and bonds, the true test lies in their efficacy in alleviating the burden on ordinary citizens. No one can deny the harsh realities faced by the Argentine populace, particularly the vulnerable segments of society such as retirees and public sector workers. The austerity measures, while touted as necessary for fiscal stability, have inflicted significant hardships, leading to a sharp decline in real wages and purchasing power. For individuals, retirees in particular, the purported slowdown in inflation is yet to materialise, underscoring the disconnect between macroeconomic policies and their impact on everyday lives. The plight of small businesses further highlights the complexity of Argentina's economic predicament. As input costs continue to soar, bottom lines of businesses erode, making them unviable. Despite the government's claims of success in lowering monthly inflation, the ground reality paints a starkly different picture, with shopkeepers struggling to stay afloat amid the relentless onslaught of rising prices.

Moreover, the austerity measures, while necessary from a fiscal standpoint, risk deepening social inequalities. Careful calibration is required to ensure these policies do not disproportionately impact those already struggling. However, amid the gloom, there is a glimmer of hope. Economists suggest that a small recent drop in the inflation rate could pave the way for a gradual recovery, with the potential for real wages to rebound. This optimism, though cautious, offers a ray of light in an otherwise tumultuous economic landscape. As Argentina navigates these turbulent waters, it is imperative for policymakers to strike a delicate balance between austerity and recovery. While fiscal discipline is essential for long-term stability, it must not come at the expense of social welfare and economic prosperity. A holistic approach, encompassing targeted interventions to support the most vulnerable segments of society, coupled with prudent macroeconomic policies, holds the key to charting a path towards sustainable growth and shared prosperity.

In the face of adversity, Argentina must draw upon its resilience and ingenuity to forge a brighter future for its citizens. It is only through collective effort and unwavering resolve that the country can overcome its economic challenges and emerge stronger on the other side.

Politics and morality

The excessiveness of Israeli actions has pricked the conscience of the youth and the recent uproars, protests, and disruptions on Western university campuses are a testimony to a contra-reaction after the genuine condemnation of the Hamas attack. Even many of the younger Jewish voters don't see unequivocal or blind support for Israel as a litmus test for their personal identity, anymore. Many Jews recognise the direct contribution of Israeli actions on the sudden rise of anti-Semitic incidents and many are concerned about the economic consequences to their livelihoods



Moral righteousness has been the presented face of the foreign policy of the United States of America since time immemorial. But beyond this thin and untenable veneer lurks the dark reality of realpolitik, power play, and even naked ambition at work. Such practicality driving sovereign behaviour is not unusual to any other country, except that the postured pretense of altruism driving American actions, when it isn't, annoys other countries. Americans often don't practice what they preach, or posture. However political correctness couched with deft word-smithing hides the real impulses and instincts that have legitimised America's dalliances with dictators, illiberal monarchs, or other unsavoury alliances. The relationship of Washington DC with the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid i.e., Israel, is one such glaring contradiction, even though Israel remains the most sanctioned country in the world, by the United Nations.

Beyond the stakes and understandable impact of roughly 8-9 million Jews in the United States (with imagined emotions attached to Israel) and their accompanying heft of economic value in terms of 'controlling' Wall Street, media houses and the US economy is general, the state of Israel affords incalculable strategic leverage to the US in global affairs. Put simply, many of the most powerful and decisive positions in the US administration and the larger socio-economic realm are populated by Jews, who bear their own impulses. Israel has been called 'America's aircraft carrier in the Middle East' for its ability to flex itself militarily and act as a bulwark against traditional foes such as Russia. The Americans have used the Israelis to keep many enemies like Iran or terror groups (even so-called 'allies' in the

Arab Sheikhdoms) in check, with Tel Aviv's overbearing and lurking presence in the region. Israelis have managed to extract a price for their relationship with the US, which has routinely exposed the hollowness of American morality in foreign policy.

The most obvious mismatch has been the unprecedented invocation of the 'veto' power in the United Nations Security Council (often, as the lone supportive voice) to rescue Israel from formal condemnations and sanctions. Over half of the 'veto' votes used by the US in its history have involved Israel. Additionally, Washington DC has been the only permanent member of the UNSC to recognise Golan Heights (taken from Syria in the Six-Day War in 1967) as legitimate Israeli territory, recognised the provocative move of recognising Jerusalem as the official capital and shifted its embassy there (thus diluting Palestinian claims), amongst many other symbolic moves that embolden the unilateral approach of the Israelis.

Such underlying equations and compulsions have defined the foreign policy of the US towards Israeli reprisals to the terror attack by the Hamas from Gaza. While the world had rightly condemned the Hamas terror attack, it had differentiated between the Hamas and the larger comity of Gazans or Palestinians. Israel didn't, and it lumped the Hamas identity onto the entirety of Gazans/Palestinians and conducted its revenge accordingly. If only the Israelis had conducted 'targeted' attacks against the Hamas - as Israel had historically conducted against militias like the PLO, Hezbollah or

even the Hamas earlier, there would not have been a global uproar. But the Israelis opted for the brutal 'scorched earth' approach. Today, there are over 35,000 Palestinians (not necessarily Hamas operatives) who have been killed in the disproportionate revenge, besides the complete flattening of the Gaza Strip. Whatever be the mealy-mouthed and flipflopping statements by the Joe Biden administration since 7 October 2023, when the Hamas attack took place, the US has had a direct hand in the massacre of the hapless Gazans.

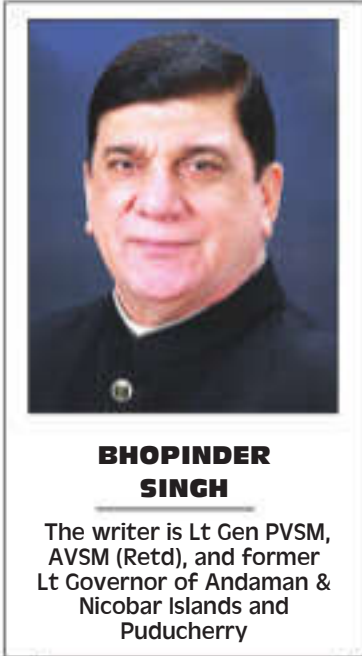
So, what guided the invaluable and questionable US support to Israeli revenge? A potent combination of history, realpolitik, invariable pressures from the 'Jewish lobby', and above all, electoral considerations in an election year!

Initially, the reaction was wrapped in 'justness' and noble outrage. But the fact is that President Biden would have seen the benefit in tilting towards Israel (beyond reasonableness) to arrest the recent drift of Jews towards Republicans, especially towards Trump personally, who had pivoted completely in favour of Netanyahu's Israel during his term with the Abraham Accords, scraping the Iran Nuclear Deal, 'Muslim-Ban' et al. Biden may have punted on the moment to assert his own positives with the 'Jewish Lobby', who are also sizeable contributors to political funding. But over time as the Israeli onslaught in Gaza continued with no restraint or heed, Biden was seen as a willful accomplice to the disproportionate retaliation and bloodshed. The excessiveness of Israeli actions has pricked the con-

science of the youth and the recent uproars, protests, and disruptions on Western university campuses are a testimony to a contra-reaction after the genuine condemnation of the Hamas attack. Even many of the younger Jewish voters don't see unequivocal or blind support for Israel as a litmus test for their personal identity, anymore. Many Jews recognise the direct contribution of Israeli actions on the sudden rise of anti-Semitic incidents and many are concerned about the economic consequences to their livelihoods - suddenly supporting Israel blindly does not make sense, even to them.

Secondly, the youth, ethnic diversities, and other progressive communities who make the bulk of the Democrat ranks are equally alarmed at Biden's blank cheque to Israel. These tectonic undercurrents in Democrat constituencies and the Jewish lobby have forced a rethink on Biden's approach towards Israel. It is sheer electoral politics and not morality that is driving Biden's U-turn, after a painfully long time. The optics of 'encouraging' Israel are detrimental to Biden's campaign.

The irrelevance of morality also numbs the American electorate in another way, when they see American 'support' to Israel or Ukraine as prohibitively unnecessary, especially as the US economy itself is struggling. After two 'vetoes' to support Israel, the US finally supported a resolution condemning Israeli overdrive. The narrative and discourse will now further change beyond stopping arms supplies and investigations into Israeli excesses and an ostensible 'blockade' to humanitarian supplies. But again, it validates the age-old truism that it is electoral stakes and not morality that drives US foreign policy, whatever be the purported diplomatic line or posturing.



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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A polymathic beacon

SIR, The lamentation echoed across the globe upon the passing of Dr. James Simons in May 2024. His departure marked not merely the loss of a luminary, but the extinguishing of a polymathic beacon whose radiance illuminated the realms of mathematics, finance, and benevolence alike.

Simons' genesis was marked by an insatiable thirst for intellectual inquiry. With an erudition unparalleled, he plumbed the depths of mathematics, particularly the esoteric realms of geometry and topology, unearthing profound revelations that reverberate across myriad scientific disciplines. His seminal contributions, notably in the labyrinthine domain of string theory and the arcane recesses of condensed matter physics, bespoke a mind unfettered by convention, charting new constellations in the firmament of human understanding. Yet, Simons' magisterial intellect knew no bounds, transcending the ivory towers of academia to embrace the tumultuous seas of

finance. Co-founding Renaissance Technologies in 1978, he embarked upon a voyage of audacious innovation, harnessing the arcane arts of quantitative analysis to divine the hidden rhythms of financial markets. RenTech's ascendance to eminence, propelled by Simons' visionary stewardship, heralded a paradigm shift in investment philosophy, ushering forth an era wherein algorithms supplanted intuition and data reigned supreme. However, Simons' luminosity extended beyond the rarefied atmospheres of academia and the frenetic milieu of finance, radiating also in the domain of philanthropy. Alongside his esteemed consort Marilyn, he assumed the mantle of beneficence, endowing the Simons Foundation with prodigious largesse.

Through this august institution, they dispensed patronage to the cause of scientific inquiry and educational advancement, nurturing the saplings of intellect that might blossom into arbors of enlightenment. In the annals of human endeavour, the saga of Dr. James Simons stands as a testament to the boundless potential of the human intellect. His was a life suffused with the incandescent glow of curiosity and the indefatigable pursuit of truth. Beyond the mortal coil, his legacy endures, an eternal testament to the transformative power of knowledge and the indomitable spirit of inquiry.

Yours, etc., Amarjeet kumar, Hazaribagh.

HOPE IN J&K

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Srinagar's way" (15 May). The high voter turnout and peaceful conduct of the ongoing elections in J&K, particularly in the Valley, signify a significant step towards democratic renewal in the region after the abrogation of Article 370 and the reorganisation of J&K in 2019. The heartening turnout of 38 per cent in Srinagar - a leap from 14.43 per cent in 2019 - signals faith in the electoral process despite the socio-political complexities of the state-turned-UT. That the 2024 General Election is being held here without any call

DANGEROUS

SIR, In April, the first batch of 64 Indian workers was sent to Israel as part of a bilateral plan that began last year between Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Modi. After Hamas's attacks on Israel on October 7, some 150,000 Palestinian workers from the West Bank and another 18,500 from the Gaza Strip, who were working in Israel lost their work permits. High salaries attract Indian workers to sign such contracts. Surprisingly, on the one side, following Iranian missile strikes on Israel on April 13, the Indian government issued a travel advisory for Indian citizens in Israel, to "restrict their movements to the minimum" yet the agreement remained in operation and Indian workers are treated as disposable casualties of war. In fact, Israel is not the only country where Indian workers face dangerous conditions. On March 5, a 31-year-old worker named Pat Nibin Maxwell was killed instantly in a Hezbollah missile attack. Under this extenuating situation, the Union government should cancel the agreement with Israel.

Yours, etc., S K Kshosla, Chandigarh, 14 May.

for boycott after decades is reflective of a growing desire among the people to actively engage in shaping their future.

However, challenges persist, especially in bridging the trust deficit between the Kashmiri polity and the Central Government.

The successful conduct of elections should serve as a catalyst for the restoration of state-

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES

Visit to shape direction of China-Europe future

President Xi Jinping's just-concluded visit to Europe could not have been more timely - it came at a pivotal moment and underscored the profound significance of China-Europe relations amid global uncertainties. His first overseas visit in 2024 and third state visit to France not only emphasized the strategic importance of China's relations with Europe, the European Union in particular, but also highlights the symbolic power inherent in such diplomatic engagements. Against the backdrop of evolving global dynamics, his visit to Europe will help deepen the strategic partnership, deepen economic cooperation, and boost people-to-people exchanges between China and Europe.

His visit also underscored the strategic significance of Europe for China on multiple fronts. First, Europe remains a crucial economic partner of China, with the EU being one of China's largest trading partners and the investment flow between the two sides being substantial. Strengthening ties with key EU member states such as France and Hungary, and other European states such as Serbia, enhances mutual access to two of the world's largest markets and high-tech powerhouses, fostering mutual economic development. Second, amid the increasing geopolitical uncertainties, China and the EU both seek to deepen mutual understanding in order to safe-

CHINADAILY

guard their respective interests and promote peace-building efforts. China's support for the EU's efforts to maintain its strategic autonomy shows it views the bloc as a strong upholder of multilateralism and an indispensable partner in mitigating geopolitical risks. For China, its engagement with Europe is integral to its broader foreign policy objectives, which include the Belt and Road Initiative, and the advocacy for improved connectivity and multilateralism. Beyond its strategic implications, President Xi's visit showcased China's maturing diplomatic prowess and international standing through its unwavering commitment to constructive engagement in the post-pandemic world. The Chinese leader's well-calibrated choice of destinations - France, Serbia and Hungary - reflects China's desire to cultivate partnerships and promote cooperation with Europe as a whole. France, under Charles de Gaulle's leadership, established diplomatic relations with China 60 years ago, much before most other Western countries. The Gaullist idea of independence, from which the concept of strategic autonomy derives its vision and ambition, has directly or indirectly guided France's approach to Sino-French relations. The approach is underpinned by a mutual recognition of each other's status as major players in a multipolar world. This strategic consensus has steered their foreign policies and facilitated high-level dialogue, ensuring the Sino-French partnership remains resilient even during challenging times. France has constantly played a key role in shaping overall EU-China ties and partnered China in addressing global challenges, from climate change to the application of AI. Serbia and Hungary are widely considered China's closest economic partners in Europe. They are also among the first group of countries to join the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative, and they host a substantial number of Chinese-invested projects, from large-scale railway infrastructure projects to electric vehicle battery plants.

Yours, etc., S S Paul, Nadia, 15 May.



More heat than light in wealth tax debate

SABYASACHEE DASH AND CHETAN CHANDGOTHA

Lately, the debate over wealth taxation has intensified, with proponents arguing for its role in addressing income inequality and funding social programmes. However, implementing a wealth tax is not without its challenges and drawbacks.

The "Proponents" and "Detractors" were sharply divided even when the debate of retention and abolition of Wealth Tax was at its peak till one fine day when the tax under reference was repealed, through Budget 2016-17 to be precise.

Dating back centuries, a tax on accumulated wealth has roots in ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome which imposed taxes on property acquired and inherited. Rome used to levy the Patrimonium tax on the total wealth of its citizens. Feudal societies in medieval Europe relied on wealth taxes to fund wars and support monarchies. France, as a European monarchy, collected 'the taille,' a direct tax on households based on the amount of land held.

In the UK, estate duties were introduced to combat rising wealth inequality during the industrialization of the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it is in the aftermath of World Wars I and II that wealth tax grew to prominence with the introduction of federal estate and gift taxes by the United States in the early 20th century.

With the advent of the 21st century, countries scaled back owing to the insignificant contribution to the overall tax revenues, administrative



challenges and concerns about the economic impact.

"King must collect tax like honey-bee, enough to sustain but not too much to destroy", said Chanakya

India introduced wealth tax in 1957. Over time, the tax base eroded, compliance became challenging, and inefficient collection led to the abolition of the wealth tax in 2015. The consequential loss to the exchequer was sought to be subrogated through levy of additional surcharge on the "super rich" under the existing tax regime.

Taxing property unfairly penalizes only a select few. This form of tax often leads to double taxation, first when the money is earned and second on the asset acquired with the tax suffered earning. The State should not dictate the virtuous usage of one's own money.

India aims to become a \$5 trillion economy in the next three

years with a vision to be an 'economic powerhouse' by 2047. The fact that this aspiration can never be translated to reality without the active support of the so called 'ultra-rich' i.e., the businesspeople, industrialists and the like, can hardly be overstated. High-net-worth individuals may alter their investment strategies, asset allocation, or even residency to avoid taxes and protect their assets. It could distort economic behavior by disincentivizing investment, entrepreneurship, and wealth accumulation. Such taxes could lead to reduced investment potential, further undermining economic competitiveness and distorting economic decision-making.

A policy flip-flop environment takes a toll on the trust and confidence with enduring economic development being the casualty. It discourages work, savings, capital formation,

potentially hindering innovation and productivity.

Advocates push forward the need to redistribute resources to reduce poverty and promote inclusive growth under the cover of the ability-to-pay principle but with alternative options available and working, taxing the wealthy may be counter intuitive.

Normatively, the tax policies across jurisdictions are guided by Taxation Doctrines in relation to source, residency, holding, recipient etc. However the essential features peculiar to a State are influenced by the economic model of the day. Tax as an instrument is used by the state depending on the chosen governance model, which brings the conversation of Capitalism v/s. Socialism to the fore.

Capitalism emphasises on 'Increased Production' whereas Socialism focuses on 'Fairer Distribution.' It is a matter of fact that India embraced the socialist model for its economic governance till the beginning of the last decade of the 20th century when LPG reforms were rolled out and empirical evidence suggests that in the first four decades after independence more poverty was created than wealth.

The shift from the Socialist model to a near Capitalist model (Hybrid system) continues to exert its profound implications on almost all segments of the economy including taxation.

When we adopted a new economic belief as a nation that rejects most of the old model's principles and favors the opposite framework, it is fair and wise to create policies that align with the new programme. Specifically, under this renewed

model, solely using tactics to discourage or single out the wealthy as a primary fiscal tool to pursue a socialist agenda could disrupt the current situation and also be subject to ethical and moral objections. Any deviation even if an aberration would be a negation of the model-in-vogue.

As a corollary, holding a few responsible for the inequalities that exist could legitimize Marxism's assertion that Capitalism inherently breeds severe economic disparities, justifying the criminal actions of the disadvantaged as a response. Small wonder, such ideologies have failed to elicit acceptance even in jurisdictions where welfarism remains a formidable article of faith.

Besides these two universally acknowledged models, there exists a third model by the name of "Restrained Consumption" that was introduced by late Pt. Deendayal Upadhyaya as part of his seminal treatise titled "Integral Humanism". The text opposes Unbridled Consumerism by drawing inspiration from Indian culture. In hindsight the concept resonates well with all the aspects that are actively debated under the overarching Climate/Environment Protection.

While the goals of wealth taxation are laudable, its re-entry is likely to bring significant challenges and risks. It could undermine economic efficiency, exacerbate capital flight, and tax evasion. Policymakers must carefully weigh these considerations and explore alternative approaches to address income inequality and promote fiscal sustainability.

(The writers are practising chartered accountants.)

OCCASIONAL NOTE

EVERY effort to combat malaria is to be welcomed, and a little pamphlet by Mr. Girindrakrishna Mitra, of 5, Nur Mohammad Lane, Calcutta, which has just appeared with a commendatory foreword by Sir Kailash Chandra Bose, merits attention if only because it indicates a desire to pass from vague generalities to constructive proposals. Taking one point only, Mr. Mitra submits a plan for the establishment of village dispensaries, with practitioners attached to them, which might, perhaps, help to meet the demand for rural medical aid. He suggests that with Rs. 500 it might be possible to start a small dispensary for, a group of four or five villages and provide a monthly allowance of Rs. 25 for a "qualified or half-qualified" doctor during a period of six months, after which, the dispensary would be expected to contribute to his maintenance. Mr. Mitra thinks the doctor might obtain board and lodging in the house of some well-to-do resident in return for his services, and that, with private practice together with a commission on dispensary sales, he might make his living. Other points touched upon by Mr. Mitra—the work of local authorities, co-operative societies, anti-malaria measures, popular education in sanitary matters—are all of obvious importance; and there will be general agreement with his plea for getting something definite accomplished without waiting for ideals. He claims that his proposals have at least the merit of being practicable without entailing heavy expenditure.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

BENGAL COUNCIL VACANCY

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STATESMAN"
SIR,—In reference to the letter published by you on Wednesday over the signature STRANDED JELLYFISH I also came away from the European Association meeting on Tuesday evening last feeling that one of the candidates, Mr. James, found himself in a peculiar quandary.

With the political atmosphere as it is at present the European Constituency must select as their representatives on the Council gentlemen who will keep before them, and protect to the best of their ability, the interests of the European section of the community which are, and will possibly in the future be, subject to a good deal of direct attack.

Mr. James' replies to his hecklers as to his position in the event of his views as a member of Council clashing with those of his directors in the Y. M. C. A. were unconvincing and not at all satisfactory. Mr. James stated that, in the event of a difference of opinion arising between himself and his Directors on this other. Which is it to be?

There does not seem to be any object in the European constituency returning a member who may be called upon by his employers to resign from the Council at any moment unless the European group in the Councils who are openly supporting his candidature would be prepared to take him over as a full time secretary, in which case he would not be a free agent and would find it difficult to express the views of his constituents if these were not approved of by this group.

I should like to ask Mr. James whether his views hitherto have accorded with those expressed by the European Association, and for how long he has been a member of that body.

Canny Shoot
Calcutta, May 9.

VANDALISM IN THE DARJEELING DISTRICT

TO THE EDITOR OF "THE STATESMAN"
SIR,—I first visited the Darjeeling District in the year 1889, when things were very different to what they now are. The town itself was a very different one and beautifully wooded. As time went along naturally the builder was busy, and the present town took the place of the wooded and beautiful slopes. That, of course, had to be, but at the same time a lot was done to make the place attractive in appearance so as to attract sightseers and others. The surrounding district remained in a state of nature, and everyone who visited the district was enchanted with the beauty of the forests full of orchids, ferns, etc., and the varied colouring. The giant trees, hundreds of years old, covered with moss, coloured ferns and orchids were a glorious sight and particularly so in spring and autumn. Now, however, all this is changing. The axe rings all round. The giants of the forest come crashing down and a general clearance is taking place. These glorious trees are turned into charcoal and fire wood for the most part, and nobody seems to care that the face of the country is changing. The Forest Department, who presumably care for nothing but money getting, are ruining these beauty spots, and I am led to understand the woods are to be replanted with one tree only, namely, the sombre cryptomeria. All the glory of the forest will have departed. Birds, beasts and flowers all have to go. Surely someone can put a stop to this before the whole landscape is ruined. Can nothing be done to stop this sort of vandalism?

Settler
Darjeeling, May 10

Brinkmanship with India won't help Nepal

ANURAG ACHARYA

In June 2020, Nepal's Parliament ratified a new political map of the country, including geographical territories that were and still remain under the control of India. While some areas in the new map, especially the Kalapani region, were already a subject of dispute between the two countries, the communist government under Khadga Prasad Oli used its two-third parliamentary majority to include areas as far as Limpiyadhura unilaterally. For those who care to look at historical evidence, Nepal had never asserted its claim over Limpiyadhura, which was a territory lost after the Sugauli treaty of 1816. It was only in context to the existing dispute over the origin of the Kali river, which forms an international boundary in the treaty, that Nepal has claimed the Kalapani region and Lipulekh as its territory. India is cognisant of Nepal's claim, and there is a joint committee looking at these boundary claims, with dialogue also happening at the Foreign Ministry level.

Oli's move in 2020 was not sudden. He had advisors who clearly understood that Nepal did not fulfil the prerequisites for a sovereign claim over most of those territories under international law, which mandates physical control of the territory with a resident population under active governance. In fact, the only claim that merits a mention, and which Nepal has strongly put across to India, is the credible evidence regarding Nepal governing the villages in the Kalapani region until a few decades back. Specifications of the evidence aside, what is clear is Nepal's claims in the Kalapani region have been acknowledged by India and well-documented by the



joint committee.

When Oli came to power after the 2017 elections, he was riding on the wave of hyper-nationalism he had managed to stoke in the aftermath of the 2015 Indian blockade. While the Madhesh-based parties had indeed initiated the border obstruction to pressure Kathmandu's political centre into conceding to their demands on the new constitution, the Narendra Modi government that had just come to power in New Delhi was blamed for actively enforcing the blockade. This is a claim India continues to deny. Whatever the truth, the blockade provided an opportune moment for Oli, whose political career was ailing at the time. He not only managed to sideline his bête noire, Madhav Kumar Nepal, inside the party but he also struck a deal with politically insecure Pushpa Kamal Dahal to cobble up a two-thirds majority in the 2017 elections. What happened next has continued to haunt Nepal's relationship with India.

Oli, of all the communist leaders of his generation, best understands that if there is one issue that could

mobilise the population across the country, it is the collective sense of insecurity against what people perceive to be India's over-reach and micro-management of Nepali politics. An average Nepali consumes Indian products, watches Bollywood movies, and supports an IPL team, all the while disdaining what they consider Indian interference in Nepali affairs.

To be fair, such a mindset is not uncommon in a relationship between two countries that are disproportionate in geography, demography, economy, or military capability. The tendency of the political class to weaponise public sentiments and insecurity against a larger neighbour for domestic electoral politics is not uncommon either. Autocratic and populist regimes across the world have consolidated their hold over power by stoking hate or fear against a perceived enemy state, painting their domestic opposition as weak and incapable of defending national interests. The definition of the enemy state and the national interests, in such cases, are often dictated by those in

power to suit their divisive politics.

When Oli refused to concede party or government leadership, Pushpa Kamal Dahal wrecked the mighty two-thirds government with the help of the disgruntled Madhav Kumar Nepal faction. Nepali Congress had no issues cashing in on this division, allowing the party's president, Sher Bahadur Deuba, to become the Prime Minister in July 2021. Upon becoming premier, Deuba and his coalition partner Dahal did all they could to normalise the relationship with New Delhi.

There was little talk about the controversial map or the Eminent Persons' Group (EPG) report, which had both become irritants in the bilateral relationship. After the 2022 elections, when Dahal became prime minister, New Delhi reciprocated by supporting Nepal's ambitions to invest in large infrastructures and export power in the Indian market and potentially to Bangladesh. In doing so, New Delhi expected to regain some of the trust it had lost after the 2015 blockade.

But Oli is a seasoned politician, a political maverick who can see two steps ahead of his competitors. He sensed Dahal's distrust of his coalition partners, his personal anxieties and insecurity about the future of his party, which he felt was dealt an under-hand during the division of electoral seats. China, which had openly helped in cobbling up the previous left unity, has been more cautious this time.

But there is plenty to read between frequent delegations shuttling between Kathmandu and Beijing over the past year. In any case, Oli convinced Dahal to leave the Nepali Congress coalition and continue in power with UML's support, with a vague promise of a long-term (elec-

toral) partnership. Upendra Yadav's Janata Samajwadi Party and the newly established Rastriya Swatantra Party were offered attractive cabinet positions in exchange for their support as well. Yadav, though, has left the coalition after the split of his party.

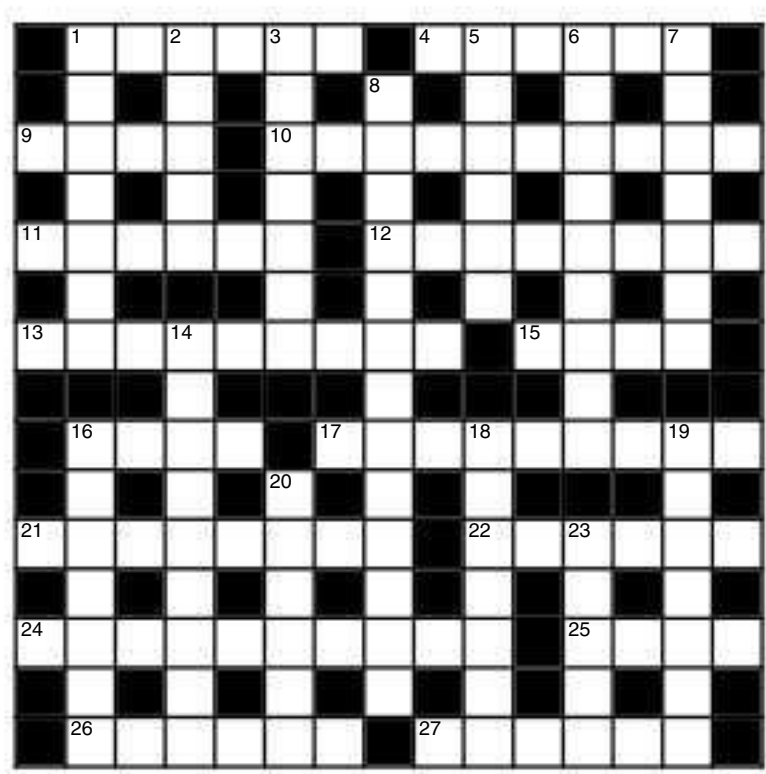
If Pushpa Kamal Dahal believes that the UML chairman took all the trouble of bringing down the NC-led coalition just to watch the game from the sidelines, he needs to change his advisors. Oli may have generously allowed Dahal to continue on the throne, but it is clear who is setting the rules of the game. The recent decision by the current government to include Nepal's new map in its currency note has Oli's footprints all over it. However, his brinkmanship with India could have serious ramifications for the country. Not only will such misadventures jeopardise Nepal's crucial economic interests, especially in the cross-border energy market where the private sector has invested billions of dollars, the ambition to access the trade route to Bangladesh and further east will not see the light of the day.

As the war in Ukraine drags on and the conflict in Gaza worsens, Washington is already zooming out from the Indo-Pacific region. This could provide a much-needed conducive environment for a rapprochement between New Delhi and Beijing, something Indian Prime Minister Modi has hinted at recently. Nepali communists must read the changing geopolitical horizon and understand the days of playing one neighbour against the other may not last for long. Nepal is better off drawing complementarities in its relationship with the two neighbours, allowing them to compete for economic interests on its own terms.

The Kathmandu Post/ANN.

CROSSWORD

NO-292782



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

PORTMANTEAUWORD
RELIEVE MISTSTEP
OCTET LACHRYMAL
DOROEAEAE
IMPROMPTU WELLL
C U O N A H A
AMEN INTERRUPT
S I O N T E R P H
YAKBUTTERMERGE
S A V S O I G R
T I D I E S T I N V O I G U E
E O A O N A H A
MUSICULOSKELETAL

ACROSS

- Surprisingly mobile blood clots (6)
- Statement about rule applied to eggs (6)
- Cover old swimming pool (4)
- Pad in which Frenchman entertains partner for the evening (4-5)
- Swimming race interrupted by American with recording equipment (6)
- Damage ring at a Spanish resort (8)

DOWN

- Teacher's favourites covering clear iodine with hot piece of lab equipment (5,4)
- Fictional bear's an adherent of Hindu philosophical system (6)
- Soldiers returned with new evidence (4)
- Unionist line adopted by Arab nation (9)
- A short stick found during search of burial site (8)
- Animal coming back with tailless bird (6)
- Temporary transfer for Next employees close to retirement (10)
- Spend money to secure Lessing's first dramatic work (4)

- Doctor given advantage in search for oysters? (6)
- Police officers let suspect get spirit (6)
- Remove hair from pie cooked near the end of the night (7)
- Pound returned by Fair English fellow (5)
- Boy clutching map of North European region (7)
- Good artist following through with drug (6)
- Octopus originally caught in net close to of sea left with a sad expression (9)

- Germanic siren featuring in folklore leitmotif (7)
- Dancing bears seem ill prepared at beginning of scene in musical (3,10)
- Doctor and old lady taking part in tiresome process (9)
- Notice allegedly found next to small opening in dense vegetation (7)
- Sleepwear's close to neckwear (7)
- It's set in stone to cause trouble (7)
- Greedy type welcoming time to prepare snack (3,3)
- Extremely destructive drug found in storage facility (5)

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



CONTRAPUNTO

Fear has always been a very important whistleblower

—Erik Pevernagie

Metropolitics

In Mumbai and Delhi, poll battles are about reaffirming party identity

The vote in financial capital Mumbai's six Lok Sabha constituencies is on May 20. Capital Delhi's seven LS seats vote on May 25. Mumbai barely stayed off the headlines — selecting candidates was messy for the four regional parties, and for BJP and Congress. Some negotiations were downright peculiar with bigwigs unwilling to contest. In Delhi, though, one can barely tell so far that elections are on, despite three national parties in the fray — BJP, Congress, and AAP.

The Delhi fights of course were being fought elsewhere, with Kejriwal arrested on March 21. On interim bail till June 1, the AAP chief has hit the campaign trail. He and Shah are shooting barb-tipped rhetorical arrows at each other. It's almost like campaign scenes are playing out without the voter's involvement, who's watching it like some reality show. Those with votes are supposed to play the role of 'audience' — and, suitably entertained, expected to go out and vote.

A closer look at Delhi shows a silent churn within parties. In BJP, which won all 7 in 2014 and 2019, a single MP is re-contesting — Manoj Tiwari. Singer Hans Raj Hans is more visible in Punjab's campaign; ex-Union health minister Harsh Vardhan, who posed with Ramdev's Coronil,

exited politics; Gautam Gambhir opted out; BJP dropped Meenakshi Lekhi and, rightly, two MPs with little understanding of parliamentary language. Congress's Sheila Dikshit is no more; Ajay Maken took the RS route; its state chief Lovely joined BJP. Congress veteran JP Agarwal, BJP-import Udit Raj and CPI-import Kanhaiya Kumar are its hopes. AAP's banking on Somnath Bharti to defeat BJP's Bansuri Swaraj, who's banking on her mother's goodwill to win New Delhi. On every seat, it's a lowkey but high stakes battle, without the din.

Mumbai's the potboiler, with Sena vs Sena on three seats, BJP vs Congress on two — BJP's Piyush Goyal (Mumbai North), and Ujjwal Nikam (Mumbai North Central) are among contestants. But as in rest of Maharashtra, contests centre on parties' existential dilemmas, the many switches too confusing for voters to go only by the candidate. In both metros, the fights are different but every contest seeks to re-establish party identity.

It's Courage, Not Crime
Whistleblowers strengthen democracy but face dangers. Give them strong legal protection

Whistleblowers have it tough across the world. The Supreme Court in Canberra, Australia, recently sentenced former Australian army lawyer David McBride for revealing information about alleged Australian war crimes in Afghanistan. This comes seven years after Australian public broadcaster ABC published a series of articles based on information provided by McBride. That information was separately confirmed by an Australian govt inquiry. However, it was McBride the whistleblower who was prosecuted.

From false claims to national security | Whistleblowing has a chequered history. During the American Civil War Abraham Lincoln's govt enacted the False Claims Act (FCA) to incentivise reporting corruption in military supplies. Interestingly, FCA remains on US statute books in an amended form and has been used over the years in cases related to fraud in military contracts and corruption in the pharma industry. But things get murky when it comes to matters of national security and wrongdoings in militaries. State interests and discipline are privileged over those seeking to spotlight internal wrongs.

Risky business | Perhaps the most high-voltage case of whistleblowing related to war crimes this century was the highlighting of atrocities committed by US soldiers in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. The horrific torture was exposed by Sergeant Joseph Darby. Once identified as the whistleblower, he and his family faced harassment and even death threats. Similarly, US's NSA contractor Edward Snowden had to flee to Russia for exposing illegal mass surveillance programmes.

India's paper tiger | India passed a Whistle Blowers Protection Act in 2014. Ironically, it hasn't been notified to date. In any case, the Act has multiple exemptions — it doesn't cover armed forces and is not applicable to the private sector. Nor does it provide financial incentives for whistleblowing like the American FCA. Civil society groups have argued that attacks against RTI activists and whistleblowers have increased in the absence of a legal framework. True, state secrets need to be protected for national security. But this can't be a blanket cover to hide corruption and criminal wrongs. Democracy is strengthened by courageous whistleblowers speaking up for justice.

Climate of fashion

A season of extreme weather events in quick succession requires an addition to many a wardrobe

Jug Suraiya



The CEO of the Indian offshoot of the international garment maker, Uniqlo, noted for its all-weather fashion wear, held a special staff meeting of all the company's employees.

Thanks to a localised version of man-made climate change marked by totally unpredictable extreme weather events occurring in rapid succession, our company has been presented with a great opportunity to break all our previous sales records, said the CEO.

Everyone present knew what he was talking about. This variant of climate change had all the media, both mainstream and social, abuzz with excited speculation as to what would happen next, or when, or why.

Even the experts on the subject admitted that the only thing that could with any degree of probability be predicted about this aspect of climate change was that it was totally unpredictable.

Some attributed the volatility of the weather to that usual suspect in such matters, 'western disturbances'.

However, in this season the weather seemed to veer, not only from day to day, but from hour to hour, not just because of western disturbances, but also disturbances emanating from the east, as well as the north, and the south, leading to the surmise that had there been more than these points in the compass, those too would have pitched in to do their disturbing duty.

Others attributed the mercurial changeability of the climate to the sharp rise in emissions that created heat island effects of hot air and other gaseous emanations.

Whatever the reasons behind the uncertainty of what the climate could get up to, from moment to moment, said the CEO, the situation calls for a very special type of garment that makes the wearer adapt to any and all weather conditions, no matter how swiftly and randomly they may change.

What made this item of clothing so topically popular was the unique material it was made of which, chameleon-like, could change colour so as to be most advantageous to the wearer in any given environment.

It was this remarkable capability that inspired the name given to this addition to the wardrobe: Turncoat.

Courting The Cops, Always

SC order in the NewsClick case shows trial court judges are authorising detentions casually. With around 50 lakh arrests a year and thousands of remand applications a day, they must apply judicial scrutiny

Naaved Mehmood Ahmad



On Wednesday, Supreme Court declared the arrest of Prabir Purkayastha, founder of NewsClick, illegal and ordered his release from custody. Purkayastha had been in police and judicial custody since October last year, in connection with a case under provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 and the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

Issue | Individual rights and national security

SC declared Purkayastha's arrest and subsequent police remand illegal on the basis that grounds of his arrest were not communicated to him in writing. The court further held that mere filing of the chargesheet would not rectify the illegality and unconstitutionality of the arrest and grant of police custody.

The court's order is significant as it recognises the need for procedural propriety to protect individual liberties, even in cases involving national security concerns.

It is, however, even more crucial for bringing attention to how remand applications are processed by magistrates and law enforcement agencies, effectively obstructing the realisation of the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 21 and 22.

Article 22 | Provide grounds of arrest in writing

Article 22 of the Constitution enshrines the right to be informed of the grounds of arrest, and to consult and be defended by a legal practitioner of choice. Clause (5) of Article 22 extends this protection to cases of preventive detention.

Drawing from the protection that Article 22 offers, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, UAPA, 1967 and other special laws require the arresting officers to inform the arrestee of the grounds of arrest. This is critical to ensure that the arrestee is able to mount a defence, protect their personal liberty and avoid unnecessary pre-trial detention.

Interestingly, these provisions do not mandate the communication of grounds of arrest to be in written form. This, in fact, was one of the grounds on which the state opposed Purkayastha's release. A contention that SC held was "untenable in the eyes of law".

Relying on SC's judgments in Harikisan vs State of Maharashtra (1962) and Lalubhai vs UOI (1982), the



bench underlined that communication of the grounds of arrest in writing "is sacrosanct and cannot be breached under any situation". In essence, a detailed and written communication of the grounds of arrest is critical for a fair remand hearing and to realise the purpose of Article 22.

Issue | Remand and due process

SC's scrutiny of the events surrounding Purkayastha's arrest and his remand hearing, however, reveals a far more concerning fact about the workings of the criminal justice system. The court noted that the entire process of securing police remand for Purkayastha was carried out in a clandestine manner, suggesting an attempt to circumvent due process of law.

In fact, the failure on the part of the police to inform Purkayastha and his advocate of choice the grounds of arrest and the proposed remand application, as well as the timing of the remand proceedings — as early as 6 in the morning at the residence of the remand judge — suggest how investigative agencies may sidestep due process requirements to retain custody of the accused.

Trial courts | First line of defence

The remand judge, perhaps the only line of defence in such a situation, failed to acknowledge these concerns and to apply judicial scrutiny, instead mechanically granting police custody for seven days.

Interestingly, this is not the only case in which remand proceedings have been called into question. In fact, SC itself in Aradesh Kumar vs State of Bihar (2014) categorically stated that in many cases detention is authorised in a "routine, casual and cavalier manner", grossly affecting the liberty of citizens.

To check this practice, SC in Manubhai Ratilal Patel vs State of Gujarat And Others (2013) underscored that the act of directing remand of an accused is a judicial function and that it is "obligatory on the part of the Magistrate to apply his mind and not to pass an order of remand automatically or in a mechanical manner".

Issue | Accountability for arrest procedures

With around 50 lakh arrests recorded every year, and thousands of remand applications heard by judges every day, the critical nature of this function cannot be overlooked, especially given the overcrowding in prisons nationwide and the minimal protections provided when an accused is in police custody.

The Wednesday order of SC must prompt greater scrutiny of arrest procedures and remand proceedings. It should also foster a renewed emphasis on procedural fairness and accountability within the criminal justice system.

The writer is a Senior Resident Fellow at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Didigiri In A Bengal Divided By Class

Trinamool has fostered a strong regionalism that equates Bengaliness with bhadralok high culture. But other Bengalis, like marginalised Matuas, are drawn towards BJP's Hindu canopy

Uday Chandra and Rounak Bose



Once again, Mamata Banerjee is in a fierce fight to defend her turf from BJP. And once again, Didi is fighting alone as her INDIA coalition partners contest separately.

In 2011, Trinamool Congress formed the govt after 34 years of Left Front govt in Bengal. Its popular slogan *Maa Maati Maanush* (mother, land, people) overrode the Left's abstractions. But much like its communist predecessors, Trinamool has fostered a strong regionalism that equates Bengaliness with *bhadralok* high culture.

It is unsurprising, then, that those who are Bengali but not *bhadralok* (genteel folk) have been BJP's principal targets since 2019. Treated contemptuously as *nimnoborgo* (lower strata) or, worse, *chhotolok* (small fry), the bottom half of society in Bengal has shown its openness to a new politics of dignity that promises to overcome the lottery of birth.

Matuas are a reformist sect of formerly untouchable and marginalised castes that have negotiated for loaves and fishes with the Modi sarkar. Seeking respectability within an all-India Hinduism, they have embraced festivals such as Ram Navami and Janmashtami, characterised by Trinamool as impositions on Bengalis by North Indian outsiders.

Stigmatised by caste as much as by forced migration from present-day Bangladesh, Matuas are now divided. The first family of the sect, descended from founder Harichand Thakur, split into pro-BJP and pro-Trinamool factions. The pro-BJP faction led by Shantanu Thakur, a minister in Modi govt and MP from Bongaon, has assured Matuas with refugee histories that their salvation lies in CAA.

But the pro-Trinamool faction, led by his aunt Mamata Bala Thakur, a Trinamool Rajya Sabha nominee,

insists that CAA requires disenfranchising oneself in order to apply for new citizenship claims. As Mamata put it, Matuas are already Indian citizens, and new citizenship claims may come with fresh uncertainty.

Matuas are salient in at least 10 Lok Sabha constituencies, mainly Ranaghat and Bongaon and to a lesser extent, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri. Outreach to them seeks to redefine what it means to be Hindu in Bengal, where 'Hindu' had long meant *bhadralok*. Successive attempts by political parties to consolidate heterodox sects and subordinated castes came to naught.

The Left Front, claiming caste-blindness, attempted to stitch together a 'socialist' polity in which all could claim a stake. But it did not politicise Hindu-Muslim difference, as had happened in undivided Bengal, a Muslim-majority province in British India.

Today, in a state where Muslims are close to 30% of the population, BJP has pitted SC and ST groups in the state as demographic counterweights. Adivasis in the Jungle Mahals and the sub-Himalayan foothills or Rajbongshis, Namashudras, and Bagdis, together roughly half of all SCs in the state, can proclaim their Hinduness to vote for BJP now without giving up meat, alcohol and other 'polluting' substances. Hindu identity is now, seemingly, a wholly electoral affair.

In 2019, BJP won 18 out of 42 seats and 40.6% of votes in Bengal, winning handsomely in the ST-dominated seats in North Bengal and the Jungle Mahals. It was a closer runner-up to Trinamool's 22 seats and 43.7% of votes.

But in the 2021 assembly

elections, a drop in votes by 2.6% led to a massive loss for BJP, which won only 77 out of 292 seats. We may sense a triumphant regionalism at work here, but in a short span of time, BJP has cobbled the support of roughly two in five voters in the state. Despite embarrassing reports of fake rape cases in Sandeshkhali and sexual harassment charges against the state governor CV Ananda Bose, it remains a formidable rival to Trinamool.

Yet, unless it makes deeper inroads into the middle and top of Bengali society, it is unlikely to become the first governing party in Delhi since 1971 to win a majority of Bengal's 42 parliamentary seats.

On the fringes, Congress and Left will fight together against both Trinamool and BJP. The INDIA coalition is missing in action. A tripartite contest is likely to favour BJP in Muslim-dominated seats by reducing Trinamool's vote share among Muslims. Vote-cutters in 2024, these parties aim to regain lost ground in the state for the next assembly elections. It may be best to see these ferociously-contested elections as one of the final episodes of the bahubalis of Trinamool taking on everyone else.

For now, Mamata's *bhadralok* identity, shared with every chief minister of the state since Independence, holds sway. After this election, though, the question on everyone's lips is: how much longer will didigiri last?

Chandra teaches politics and history at Georgetown University, Qatar. Bose is his research assistant

Bengal votes on May 20 (7 seats) in the fifth of its 7-phase polls

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

Democracy is not merely a form of Government. It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards our fellow men

BR Ambedkar

Time To Enlighten, Educate And Express

Radhanath Swami

Leaders are the most important people in society. They define the goals, priorities and progress of a nation. They represent the nation on the world stage through conduct, character, and personality. They influence the aspirations, attitudes and mindsets of the people. They look towards their leaders for inspiration and motivation. History shows that great and good leaders make a nation, whereas bad and wicked leaders break a nation. The most significant mishaps and catastrophes the world has gone through and is going through are a result of the mistakes of its leaders. The better leaders we have, the world will be a better place to live and thrive for all. Bhagwad Gita (3.21) stresses the role of leaders as role models for the public and the need to educate those leaders (4.2).

It is essential to have leaders with

character and competence for the holistic growth of individuals and nations. Holistic growth involves dharma, social, artha, economic, kama, personal, and moksha, spiritual growth. Being in a democracy is a great privilege wherein we have the right to choose our leaders in a free and fair way. According to a Pew survey, around half of the nations in the world are bereft of this privilege. Vibhishan wanted to live a life of righteousness, devotion and compassion. But he was caught up under the tyrannical rule of Ravan, the leader of Lanka. Ravan propagated materialism, self-centredness and irreligion. Vibhishan realised that Ravan's leadership was detrimental to his growth and the growth of Lanka. He tried his best to counsel Ravan and inspire him to mend his ways but to no

avail. Then, he came across Hanuman and heard about Ram, his exemplary leadership, glorious virtues and kindness.

Vibhishan found out more about Ram's leadership. He contrasted Ravan's leadership with Ram's leadership.

He felt Ram's leadership would be congenial for his growth and that of Lanka. Then, he was in a situation where he had to choose between Ravan and Ram. He boldly made the right choice to be with Ram as Ram provided him with an opportunity to assist in fighting against Ravan. Eventually, Ravan was defeated, and Vibhishan was installed as the king of Lanka. By choosing the right leader, Vibhishan did good for the people of Lanka.

First, we need to realise how the quality of our lives and progress depends on the type of government that

gets elected. It affects not just our lives but also lives of our fellow citizens and future citizens of the nation. The symptom of an evolved human being is that he thinks about others' welfare. Once we enlighten ourselves with the importance and significance of casting our vote, we can evaluate our choices.

Once we grasp the gravity of our duty, we must meticulously consider the choices before us. We must stay focused on our purpose, resisting the allure of superficial temptations. It is crucial to consult reliable sources and thoroughly assess candidates' character, values, and competence. Their past actions and future goals should be scrutinised. This careful evaluation will guide us in making informed decisions that align with our values and aspirations.

Once we educate ourselves about the different choices, then we should select the best option with confidence and clarity.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

ED in the dock

Court curbs agency's powers under PMLA

THE country is in the midst of the General Election, but it's the ED (Enforcement Directorate) which is far more in the news than the EC (Election Commission). The Supreme Court ruled on Thursday that the ED could not arrest an accused under Section 19 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) after a special court had taken cognisance of the complaint of money laundering. The Bench stated that when an accused appeared before a judge in pursuance of a summons, the agency would have to apply to the court concerned to obtain his or her custody. According to the court, such an accused is not required to apply for bail as he or she would not be treated as being in custody.

The ruling is another setback to the ED, which has been under intense judicial scrutiny in recent months and repeatedly accused by Opposition parties of overreach. These parties, especially AAP, have claimed that their leaders are being targeted by Central probe agencies at the behest of the ruling party. The ED's allegedly unbridled powers under the PMLA have been the subject of a heated debate since 2017, when a Division Bench struck down the Act's Section 45(1), which imposed additional conditions for grant of bail to the accused. However, this decision had been overruled by a July 2022 judgment of another SC Bench.

Meanwhile, the SC has asserted that no exception was made in granting interim bail to Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal in a money laundering case. 'We said in our order what we felt was justified,' the Bench said, adding that a critical analysis of the verdict was welcome. These observations have come two weeks after the court questioned the ED about the timing of Kejriwal's arrest — in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections. Clearly, the ED has a lot of explaining to do in one case after another.

Deadly oversight

Billboard collapse calls for liability, reform

THE collapse of a massive illegal billboard following a storm in Mumbai that claimed the lives of 16 people and injured 75 — all passersby — has exposed a troubling nexus between negligence, corruption and regulatory failure. The disaster underscores the human cost of systemic oversight and dereliction of duty.

The billboard, weighing 250 tonnes and far exceeding permitted dimensions, was erected in blatant violation of civic guidelines. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) had raised concerns about the hoarding two years ago, yet no substantial action was taken to address the hazard. The failure to enforce regulations or dismantle the illegal structure exemplifies the dangerous complacency and possible corruption in municipal circles. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Last June, a huge hoarding on a highway near Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu collapsed, killing three workers on the spot. The police said it had been installed without authorisation by the civic body. In 2019, a young woman died in Chennai when an illegal banner fell on her. Such incidents point to a pattern of negligence and regulatory lapses that put lives at risk.

Culpability extends beyond the advertising agency behind the billboard. The BMC, which allowed this violation to persist despite knowledge and prior warnings, bears significant responsibility. The filing of a culpable homicide case against the advertising agency owner, Bhavesh Bhide, is a necessary but insufficient step. Accountability must be comprehensive, holding all parties responsible for this preventable tragedy. The announcement of compensation by CM Eknath Shinde does not suffice to address the underlying regulatory rot. This mishap should prompt an overhaul of regulations governing outdoor advertising and other hazardous structures. Robust safety audits, stringent enforcement of guidelines and zero tolerance to violations are needed to ensure citizens' safety across the country.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, MAY 17, 1924

Anti-India propaganda

JUDGING from the papers received by the last foreign mail, an anti-India propaganda of an unprecedented magnitude is just now being carried on by an influential section of the British Press under the pretext of educating the bulk of the electorate, with whom, it should be remembered, rests the ultimate responsibility for a good government in the Indian Empire. The real object underlying this campaign of misrepresentation is not far to seek. It is to rally all the saner elements in the British political life, meaning in common language the die-hards and other professed enemies of legitimate Indian aspirations in one big effort to resist the demand put forward by politically articulate India for an immediate revision of the Government of India Act with a view to the granting of Dominion Home Rule at the earliest possible date. The British voters are being frightened into the belief that India is in a very serious state, and that it will be foolish to underestimate the full gravity of the problems that England has to face in this 'dependency.' It may be that there is enough in the political situation in this country that will be viewed with 'grave concern' by British statesmen, but it is a foul calumny to proclaim, as some of the writers in England are doing, that while only 20 years ago an Englishman's life was 'sacred' to Hindus and Mahomedans alike, nowadays murder of an Englishman is a 'common crime'. The Times, which is always guarded in its statements, does not go so far but does recognise that the entry into the councils of extremists is seriously impeding their action.

All is not bright on the BJP front

The news from centres where four rounds of voting are over is not encouraging for the ruling party



TRYSTS AND TURNS

JULIO RIBEIRO

THE Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) and the more recently established National Stock Exchange (NSE) have spoken. The BSE's Sensex, which began teetering after the first round of the Lok Sabha elections, fell with a bang by a thousand points after the third phase! Sensex and the BSE's Nifty are fairly reliable guides to political situations.

In 2014, the market was anxiously awaiting the arrival of a right-wing government. Speculators had predicted a victory for the BJP. The party's performance in the polls was even better than what the optimists had visualised. Sensex took off at a very fast clip initially and then settled down to a steadier pace till it reached astronomical heights recently when Modi declared that he was aiming for 400 Lok Sabha seats.

The share market is the biggest single gambling den in my city. Of course, gambling on stocks is perfectly legal, though very risky all the same. The operators are not going to venture in without their dollop of *khobar*. Since their money is at stake, the gems of information that Dalal Street operators collect are more authentic than what normal rumour mills produce.

The steep drop in the prices of shares like those of Reliance Industries, HDFC Bank, L&T and TCS, all market leaders, is nothing but ominous. The market feels that the Modi-Shah duo is in trouble. I suspect (kindly note that my suspicion is just that — a suspicion) that the voting trends must have been garnered from the foot soldiers serving the army of 'exit' pollsters. They have been



ON THE BACK FOOT: It is apparent that there is no election 'wave' this time. PTI

debarred by the Election Commission of India (ECI) from publicising their findings till the last vote is punched in on the last day of the month-and-a-half-long battle.

The BJP's inability to enthuse voters this time has been doing the rounds on the streets of our cities and towns. That there is no 'wave' is also apparent. The use of unfair, ungentlemanly tactics like imprisoning a leader of a national party at election time is another clear indication of the nervousness that has taken hold. Even the spectacular inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya did not help, as we now note with the benefit of hindsight.

To add what we *desis* call *masala* to the narrative, one of the first accusations Arvind Kejriwal made on being released on bail to canvas for INDIA candidates was that Narendra Modi would step down at the age of 75 in September next year and that he would be succeeded by Amit Shah as the Prime Minister. This possibility, which incidentally the common man had already predicted, ruffled the feathers of BJP bigwigs. Four of them — Shah himself, Rajnath Singh, Nirmala Sitharaman and JP Nadda — protested vociferously.

The use of unfair tactics like imprisoning a leader of a national party is a clear indication of the nervousness that has taken hold.

They asserted that Modi would serve his full term of five years.

By doing so, they confirmed two hypotheses that would often be debated in parlours and marketplaces and set our doubts at rest. The first was that Modi's diktat that leaders should retire at 75 applies only to his colleagues, not to him. The second, more relevant to us citizens, is that Shah is not the people's choice or even the BJP's rank and file's choice for the top job. The very mention of that possibility by a sworn enemy (Kejriwal) set the alarm bells ringing. Kejriwal is set to return to Bihar

jail on June 2. Before that date, he should draw some more rabbits out of his AAP hat in order to elicit some more truths from the BJP's top brass.

When Kejriwal was released on bail by the Supreme Court, a BJP leader even suggested that the honourable judges were taking sides in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. That inference was in very poor taste. The judges explained in detail why they had decided as they did. What the judges refrained from saying, but was probably on their minds, was that it was the Enforcement Directorate (ED) which was taking sides in the elections by waiting for nearly two years to arrest the leader of an up-and-coming party like AAP. The ED had issued summons to Kejriwal nine times before the arrest. It could have applied the guillotine after the third summons was dishonoured. But, no, the ED obviously had a grander design.

By releasing Kejriwal for the period of the elections, the judges have righted a wrong that the ED had perpetrated and provided a level playing field for the electoral game. The decision restored the people's faith in the

impartiality of the judiciary which, unfortunately, was under question at times of late.

Another well-respected institution, the ECI, should take a leaf from the Supreme Court's book and regain its honour and prestige as an independent, impartial body reporting only to the Constitution and its own conscience. It can regain its good name and establish its credibility if it raps all parties equally when their speakers indulge in hate speech or utter inanities without thinking. The Prime Minister should set the standards. His outburst in Rajasthan about infiltrators and those with large families was one of the worst instances of hate speech heard on the election trail.

In the midst of all this evil, the BJP's partner in Karnataka, the Janata Dal (Secular) of former Prime Minister Deve Gowda, lent a thick slice of spice to the election scenario in that crucial (for the BJP) state. When the story of the patriarch's grandson, Prajwal Revanna, broke, Modi's party immediately distanced itself from the young man's peccadilloes. But some of the stain will remain.

If Prajwal's alleged escapades were not enough, the cup of despair was filled to the brim when allegations of molestation were made against a constitutional functionary in West Bengal by a female Raj Bhavan employee. The Governor's claim that the charge was fabricated and politically motivated may have cut ice with the public but for his misconceived move to summon the media and display CCTV footage to disprove the allegations. The Governor was not caught *in flagrante delicto* like the late Congressman from Uttarakhanda who was the Governor of Andhra Pradesh when three women were pictured purportedly in his bed.

The news from the centres where four rounds of voting have been completed is not encouraging for the party that spoke of a tally of 400 for the NDA and 370 for itself alone. At present, it is squarely on the back foot, fighting for a marginal victory in a close battle.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Voting in an election is a skill, not a random intuition. — Socrates

'Z' security challenge

BRIG SANDEEP THAPAR (RETD)

A few months after my promotion to a flag rank in the Army, I was allotted the Pune brigade. As it was located next to the Southern Command headquarters, I assumed that this would be a challenging appointment.

Soon, I reached Pune and took over. Knowing the operational area and the units was the key to a successful command. I got on with the job. While one of the units in my brigade was from the Sikh regiment (my own regiment) and relatively easy to identify with, the other two were from the illustrious Maratha and Mahar regiments. The Mahar battalion was on its way out; the Maratha unit was midway through its tenure. During my first visit, the Maratha CO informed me that his unit would be celebrating its Golden Raising Day the following year. Incidentally, the Corps Commander was not only from the same regiment but also the same unit — and this complicated matters. He was a simple man with few requirements but would find fault with the most inconsequential things. Suddenly, the event acquired a bigger stature.

For such occasions, normally all officers of the unit are invited, in addition to officers from a local formation. Any special invitee is approved by the Colonel of the Regiment (COR, the seniormost officer of the regiment), if senior to him. One fine day close to the event, the Maratha CO informed me that Gen KS Brar (ret'd) had conveyed his desire to attend the Raising Day, and the COR had approved it.

Gen Brar (aka Bulbul Brar) commanded the forces in Operation Blue Star. He had 'Z' security and there were protocols to be followed during his visits. Soon, I got instructions from higher HQ that my formation would be responsible for his security during the visit. Since my Mahar battalion had moved out on turnover and its replacement unit was yet to arrive, and with Maratha battalion involved in its event, I allotted the task to the Sikh unit.

Preparations commenced till one day I got a call from the Colonel (Intelligence) of the Command HQ. He came straight to the point. 'Do you know why Gen Brar has Z-category protection, sir?' I wanted to tell him that I was handling the turmoil during that turbulent post-Blue Star period at an isolated post in the North-East when he was still a kid, but all I said was 'I do'. Then, he said: 'And yet you have made a Sikh unit responsible for his protection?'

In reply, I asked him: 'Do you know which unit has been responsible for Gen Brar's security at his Mumbai residence for the past two years?'

'It is the garrison battalion, sir,' he said.

'And do you know which is that garrison battalion?'

'No, sir.'

'It is a Sikh battalion,' I said, ending the conversation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India must push for ceasefire

With reference to 'Gaza tragedy', the world sees India as an empathic country. New Delhi rushes to the rescue of any country reeling under a humanitarian crisis. A case in point is the extension of a credit line by India to crisis-hit Sri Lanka. India always stands up for human rights. Its lack of action against Israel's excesses in Gaza will hit its global standing. The war is destroying countless lives, tearing families apart and rendering people homeless. The UN probe into the matter is welcome. While India should not get drawn into the Israel-Hamas war, it must at least take a firm stand on it. The death of the UN staffer is yet another reason for India to call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

ASHA RANI, YAMUNANAGAR

Protection of civil liberties

Apropos of 'Rule of law prevails', the protection of civil liberties and ensuring justice are of utmost importance in a democratic country. Even though the Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasised that bail should be the norm and jail an exception, citizens often bear the brunt of misuse of anti-terror laws and a lack of adherence to arrest procedures by investigation agencies. Loopholes and procedural lapses are quite common in police investigations and arrests. The conviction rate in India in such cases remains very low. However, every case is different. And in some cases, an accused has to be kept behind bars to send out a strong message. The public must not lose faith in the Indian justice delivery system.

NISHANT PRASHAR, KANGRA

Mere release not enough

Refer to the editorial 'Rule of law prevails'; the mere release of NewsClick editor-in-chief Prabir Purkayastha and human rights activist Gautam Navlakha is not enough. There has to be a provision in place for compensation to an accused in case he is kept in wrongful confinement for a certain amount of time. The two cases have once again raised questions about the functioning of the police and the failure of the lower judiciary to defend civil liberties. Besides, the apex court rightly stressed in

Purkayastha's case the need to inform an accused about the grounds of his arrest.

LALIT BHARADWAJ, PANCHKULA

Negligence costs lives

A massive hoarding collapsed in Mumbai's Ghatkopar area amid a dust storm and unseasonal rainfall. The billboard had reportedly been put up without the permission of the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation). It is a matter of serious concern that at least 16 lives were snuffed out in the incident. Gross negligence on the part of the authorities concerned and a blatant disregard for safety regulations are to blame for the mishap. Officials of Mumbai's civic body should be held accountable for letting ad agencies set up oversized hoardings in the city without any clearance from it.

DEVENDRA KHURANA, BHOPAL

Residents' safety gone to the dogs

Dog bite incidents have become increasingly common across the country. Packs of stray dogs can be seen roaming around residential areas, posing a threat to the safety of the residents, especially children and the elderly. Besides, street dogs, which often search for food in dustbins, can spread diseases. It is imperative that the local authorities concerned take prompt action to check the menace by stepping up vaccination drives and creating shelters for strays. Joint efforts from the government and the residents are needed to tackle the problem and ensure the wellbeing of the people.

SAHIL GARG, RAMPURA PHUL

Double standards of BJP

The BJP workers' protest against the alleged assault on AAP MP Swati Maliwal by an aide of Arvind Kejriwal and the quick action taken by the Delhi Police in the matter reflect the double standards of the saffron party. Where were they when female wrestlers were holding protests against party MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over alleged sexual harassment? Why did these BJP workers not express any concern when the grapplers were manhandled by police personnel? It is unfortunate that government authorities, right from those at the top to the ones at the bottom, remained silent spectators throughout the episode.

BHUPINDER KOCHHAR, PANCHKULA

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

Stringent laws have made prolonged detention norm



SRIRAM PANCHU
SENIOR ADVOCATE

IN the film world, we are used to the phenomenon of delayed releases. It seems to be so in the judicial world as well. Arvind Kejriwal has been released after 50 days in captivity, all during peak election campaigning. And now the Supreme Court has set at liberty Prabir Purkayastha after he has been inside a prison for about 225 days. While there is relief at the release, one must question why it takes so long, and what kind of laws keep men behind bars so easily.

Purkayastha is the head of NewsClick, an online journalistic platform known for its sharp reporting, independent views and for not being particularly respectful of the powers that be. People like him are irritants to excessively strong governments, which like media outlets to be supportive by nature or bought out otherwise. How dare he focus on the farmers' agitation, Covid failures and the like! He was charged with a rather unusual offence — of accepting funds from Chinese sources to influence the political narrative in

India. A bit surprising, since one doesn't remember any pro-Chinese narrative from NewsClick. While one should be wary of China, one would have thought that would extend to preventing border incursions and curbing excessive dependence on imports. But no, Purkayastha is the problem, it seems. An associate turned approver — not much to wonder about that since this is happening pretty regularly now, as witnessed in the Kejriwal case.

The flaw in the case was a gaping one. Purkayastha and his lawyer were not informed about the grounds for his arrest and the remand order was passed before the lawyer had received the remand application. Now this kind of non-conformity with the law is what lawyers and judges call "going to the root of the matter"; it vitiates the entire proceedings. Notice that this flaw happened on day one. Yet, and this is what should disturb us, it has taken the judicial system more than half a year to release him.

We need to focus on why it is that invariably the accused has to travel all the way to the apex court to obtain release. Why aren't district courts and high courts doing their job of providing legal redress in cases of personal liberty? While the members of the former may not feel sufficiently protected, HC judges have as much constitutional protection for their independence as the judges of the Supreme Court have. What prevents



LAPSE Prabir Purkayastha (right) and his lawyer were not informed about the grounds for his arrest and the remand order was passed before the lawyer had received the remand application. PTI

them from stepping up to the plate, especially when the facts are stark enough? The system works well when each level of the judiciary plays its part, and an overdependence on the highest court is not healthy. Even there, we have seen the unusual phenomenon of withdrawal of personal liberty cases of prominent individuals after a noticeable change of the roster.

One cannot blame our judges overmuch, however. The chief problem is the monstrous nature of the laws under which these detentions are made. These are the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), 1967, and the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002. Purkayastha, Sudha Bharadwaj, Gautam Navlakha, the late Father

Why aren't district courts and high courts doing their job of providing legal redress in cases of personal liberty?

Stan Swamy and other Bhima Koregaon accused were held under the first, and Kejriwal, Hemant Soren, K Kavitha, Manish Sisodia and other politicians under the latter. These Acts and later amendments — and here both the BJP and Congress governments are to blame — make it virtually impossible to get bail, mandating that the judge first find that the accused is prima facie innocent; this is an inversion of the time-honoured principle of presumption of innocence. This principle is the first rule of civilised societies, and any departure from it, unless justified by extreme risk to society, is an indication that the rule of law has become a casualty to politics. There are other damaging provisions — the

authorities can arrest without much cause; the normal criminal law restrictions on the police are absent; confessions obtained in custody are valid. Above all, there is the application of this draconian statute to ordinary offences. Even the dreaded Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), 1976, had an advisory board of high court judges to review detentions during the Emergency; it is noteworthy that the laws in question have no such provision in free India.

The sad part of the story is that the SC has upheld the validity of these laws — lock, stock and barrel — for the State and against citizens. A blot on our judicial landscape is the judgment of Justice AM Khanwilkar in the VM Choudhary case, equalling the constitutional and public damage that was done in that infamous judgment (*ADM Jabalpur vs Shivkant Shukla*, 1976) where it was held four to one (the great Justice HR Khanna dissented) that with the proclamation of the Emergency and suspension of fundamental rights, citizens were at the mercy of the State. The SC has admitted a review of the Choudhary judgment, but this is another priority case languishing without a hearing. Of cheer today, however, is the judgment of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan, curbing the ED's power to arrest after the special court takes cognisance of a complaint.

Purkayastha's long detention is particularly disturbing because courts worldwide are usually quick to examine cases of journalists being held in preventive custody. The judiciary and a free press are pillars of democracy, and the courts must be more vigilant in checking overbearing governments of whichever hue which threaten their members. But recent detentions have lasted long — journalist Siddique Kappan, for example. In contrast, Arnab Goswami (albeit not arrested under these laws) got double-quick release; these are not good messages to send out.

The record of the authorities in proving guilt and securing convictions under these laws is abysmal — as low as 3 per cent. This means that citizens were being held despite being innocent, and often without reasonable cause. When will our laws and courts start thinking about compensation for unjust imprisonment and deprivation of liberty? And when will we teach officers of such agencies and their political masters that they do not have immunity for mala fide and wantonly wrongful acts? Is the arm of the law sufficiently long?

With the assistance of Vikas Murli Dharam, lecturer, Sai University, and Aprameya Manthena, advocate, Madras High Court

This election is a litmus test of our collective wisdom



ASHWANI KUMAR
FORMER UNION MINISTER FOR LAW AND JUSTICE

WITH the conclusion of the fourth phase of the Lok Sabha elections on May 13, the electoral fate of contestants from 379 of the 543 seats seeking election to the highest forum of Indian democracy is sealed in ballot boxes. The election, seen as transformative of the nation's political landscape, is witnessing a spirited pushback to the Modi regime from the INDIA bloc, even as the ruling dispensation led by the PM has had a clear head start in scripting its campaign theme.

The Opposition's counter narrative, focused on the defence of constitutional democracy and its concomitant values, is premised on the authoritarian impulses of a muscular state that negate the first principles of liberal democracy and accountability of power enshrined in the nation's republican charter. The

unprecedented arrests across India of the ruling regime's key political adversaries, a demonstrable decline of constitutional institutions, a captive bureaucracy and a generally obsequious media, are cited in support. Ensuring a national resonance for its inspirational narrative is the principal challenge for the Opposition.

Regrettably, the diminishing and debilitating tone of a cacophonous campaign on both sides seems to have drowned out the real issues, with abuse and calumny substituting for reason and contestation. The perversion of democratic discourse helmed by leaders unable to rise above themselves attests to a flailing democracy. The pursuit of power for its appellations alone, with scant regard for its ends and a cynical deriding of political idealism as a utopian dream to be argued out of consciousness, presents the electoral exercise as clothing the pursuit of personal ambitions with a semblance of democratic legitimacy.

If indeed the BJP and the Opposition consider this election a watershed moment that will determine the future of the country, they must continue to focus public attention on core national issues. The INDIA bloc, speaking



PURPOSE This election is about reinforcing the liberties of equal citizenship and ensuring that the power sought in the name of the people is used in furtherance of their inherent rights. ANI

in multiple voices, cannot forget "the plain lesson of history, that the wants of men will only secure recognition to the point that they are forcibly articulate..." as Harold Laski put it. The power of a clear statement is critical for the success of the Opposition's campaign. Apart from an unrelenting focus on its core campaign theme, communicated and made intelligible to each voter, the alliance cannot shirk the critical question of an alternative leadership of the nation. The Congress, as the principal Opposition party, has advisedly chosen

Irrespective of who forms the government, victory must belong to those whose politics and votes sustain a democracy founded on justice and human dignity.

not to formally present its chief campaigner, Rahul Gandhi, as the prime ministerial candidate. Whatever the limitations and logic of the situation, the question of leadership will be critical to the outcome of the campaign, flawed comparisons with the past notwithstanding. As a necessary condition of revitalising itself to serve as the fulcrum of Opposition unity, the grand old party must recognise the distinction between servility and loyalty of its members. Only then can it reclaim the willing allegiance of its alienated cadres. In its internal

functioning, it must listen magnanimously to 'the hidden silences'.

Evidently, self-effacing humility and generosity of heart to heal the erasure of conscience are critical attributes of leadership needed for national renewal.

The PM, as the chief campaigner and torchbearer of his party's ideology, has demonstrated an exceptional tenacity of purpose and will to prevail against the combined opposition of 26 parties. He has strategically anchored his party's campaign in an appealing sense of national glory, hope for the people in their future and emotional sensitivities, and he may well win a third consecutive term in office. But he would, in his wisdom, know that the ideas of justice, dignity and freedom outlive the seduction of power. As the leader of a nation defined by its diversity, he must accept that his primary obligation is to nurture a unifying politics to sustain national unity and bridge the myriad socio-political divides. Electoral victory must mean more than an arithmetical majority.

Irrespective of who forms the government, victory must belong to those whose politics and votes sustain and strengthen a democracy founded on justice and

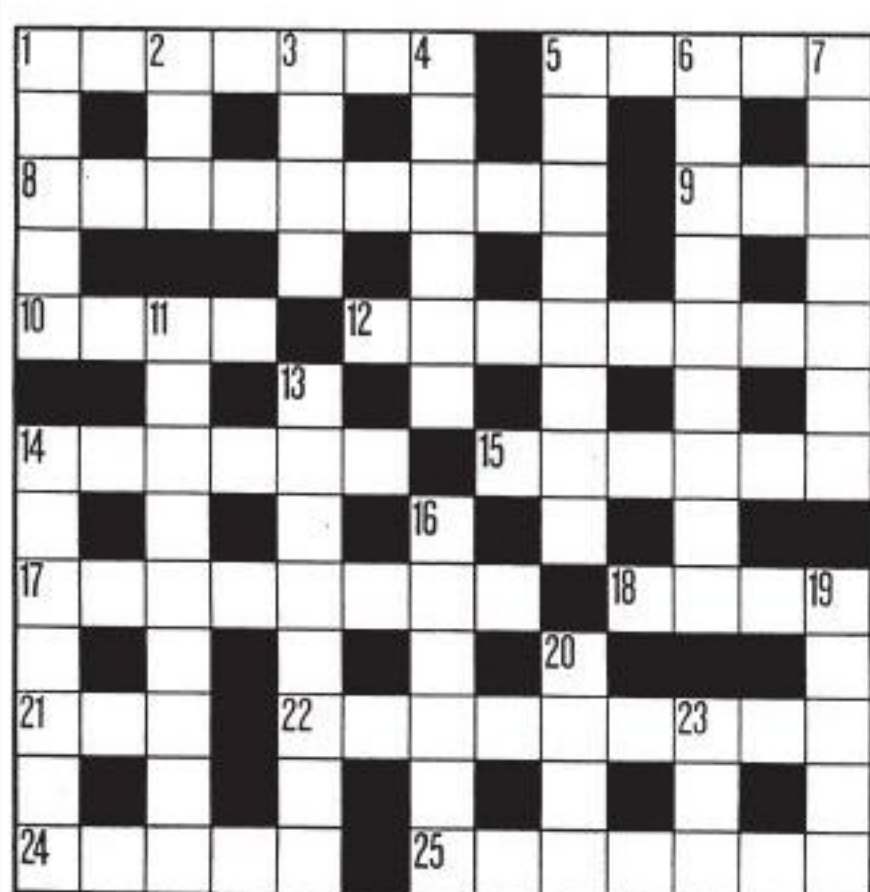
human dignity, in which all of us can hold our heads high as empowered citizens of an enlightened nation that aspires to be the *vishwaguru*.

In this aspirational view of our common future, there is no scope for narrowness of mind, wilfulness or transient responses to political exigencies at the cost of the nation's foundational principles. In this moment of test, those who stand on the side of freedom will find themselves on the right side of history. This election, seen as a historic milestone in the life of the nation, will test our collective wisdom on how we establish justice as the first virtue of social and political institutions and the basis of a just state.

The election is about reinforcing the liberties of equal citizenship and ensuring that the power sought in the name of the people is used in furtherance of their inherent rights. It will define the land and its people, who alone must mediate their future, remembering that the inviolability of freedom depends on the moral courage, fearlessness and magnanimity of its defenders. This election cannot be about one's victimhood. It must instead heal the deepening fissures in our social fabric so that we can claim that Indian democracy is not a beguiling dream.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD



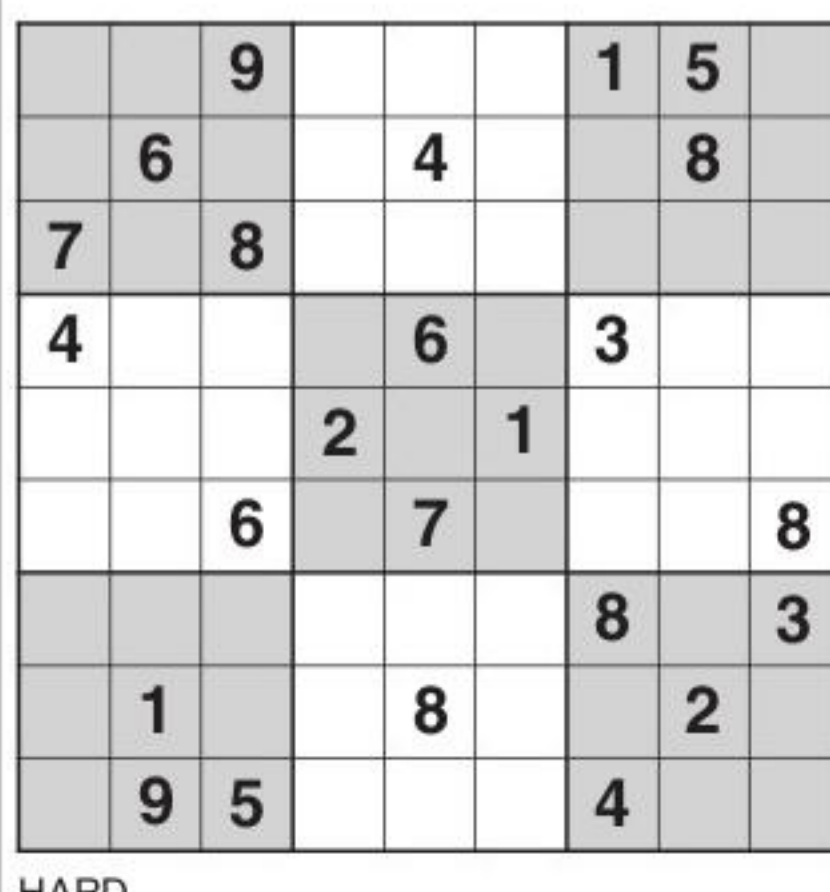
- ACROSS**
- Suffer mental breakdown (5,2)
 - Decorative design (5)
 - Under intense strain (2,3,4)
 - Manage fraudulently (3)
 - Frustrate (4)
 - Marshy area (8)
 - To an excessive degree (6)
 - Composer of Don Giovanni (6)
 - Of one mind (2,6)
 - Percolate slowly (4)
 - Occasional (3)
 - Out of bounds (3,6)
 - Perfume (5)
 - Leather-processing factory (7)
- DOWN**
- Throng (5)
 - Operate effectively (3)
 - Sharp (4)
 - Capital of Czech Republic (6)
 - Substantiate (4,4)
 - Bring to an end (9)
 - A fabrication (7)
 - Run away (9)
 - Temporary loss of consciousness (8)
 - Foreboding disaster (7)
 - Gain (6)
 - Troublesome (5)
 - Portent (4)
 - Wrath (3)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Caught on, 5 Slim, 9 Ultra, 10 Drifter, 11 Oil the wheels, 13 Indoor, 14 Apogee, 17 In the running, 20 Assured, 21 Raise, 22 Then, 23 Prospect.

Down: 1 Clue, 2 Untried, 3 Heart-to-heart, 4 Oodles, 6 Lithic, 7 Marksman, 8 With open arms, 12 Militant, 15 Genuine, 16 Murder, 18 Taste, 19 Wept.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 17TH 2024, FRIDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 27
- Jyeshtha Parvishtha 4
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 9, up to 8.49 am
- Vyagatha Yoga up to 9.21 am
- Purvaphalguni Nakshatra up to 9.18 pm
- Moon enters Virgo sign 4.05 am

FORECAST

SUNSET:	FRIDAY	19-21 HRS
SUNRISE:	SATURDAY	05-27 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	43	26
New Delhi	43	25
Amritsar	43	26
Bathinda	45	29
Jalandhar	43	27
Ludhiana	43	27
Bhiwani	45	29
Hisar	46	26
Sirsa	45	30
Dharamsala	33	22
Manali	27	06
Shimla	29	18
Srinagar	27	13
Jammu	40	24
Kargil	26	09
Leh	21	08
Dehradun	39	25
Mussoorie	27	18