



## Trade puzzle

The uptick in goods exports is heartening, but difficult to sustain

Towards the end of a tumultuous trading year, India's goods exports jumped 11.9% in February, marking the healthiest uptick in 20 months. The \$41.4 billion tally is the highest in 11 months, and only the third occasion in two years that the \$40 billion mark has been breached. It is remarkable that this spurt, significantly higher than the average export tally of \$35.4 billion in the first ten months of this year, comes amid persistent concerns about disruptions in the Red Sea and the drought-hit Panama Canal that have throttled vital trading routes and spiked the time and cost of moving consignments. While the last two months' trade numbers suggest that India is yet to feel the full impact of the logistics challenges for servicing key markets in Europe and the Americas, it may be too simplistic a conclusion. It is plausible that some of February's numbers may reflect shipments that were probably despatched earlier and reached their destinations only last month using longer routes. Economists believe a combination of backlogged orders attaining fruition and demand improvements may be at work. However, with interest rates still high, global demand conditions are yet to demonstrate the rebound the World Trade Organization (WTO) had hoped for in 2024.

The WTO expects global trade to rise 3.3% this year after a 0.8% crawl in 2023. But by its own reckoning, using a gauge called the Goods Trade Barometer, things are yet to perk up. As of March 8, the barometer, where a reading of over 100 reflects above-trend exim volumes, had a reading of just 100.6. The export orders parameter was marginally higher at 101.7 but container shipping slipped to 98.6. Some modest gains in the first quarter of 2024 may be seen owing to the base effects of a weak 2023, but any such gains could be easily derailed by regional conflicts and geopolitical tensions, the WTO has warned. Policymakers may have turned upbeat about surpassing last year's record overall exports (merchandise and services combined), but must not lose sight of the lingering risks and challenges, including the impact of freight hikes on margins. While electronics goods exports have been an outlier in 2023-24's weak exports narrative (-3.5% so far), the WTO's latest barometer reading for electronic components trade has plummeted to 95.6. This is visible in February's numbers as both electronics imports and exports grew just fractionally over 1%. For now, the trade deficit should not be a concern, despite imports jumping at a 17-month high pace last month, led by a spike in inflows of increasingly pricey gold. Finding better ways to support exporters, especially in adversely hit employment-intensive sectors such as textiles, and gems and jewellery, remains critical.

## Hollow victory

The manner of Putin's win exposes the underlying weakness of the regime

The result of Russia's March 15-17 elections was known to everyone even before the first ballot was cast. The only question that needed to be answered was what the winning margin of President Vladimir Putin, who has been at the helm for nearly a quarter century, would be. On Monday, Russia's Central Election Commission (CEC) said Mr. Putin had won nearly 88% of the vote, while nearest rival Nikolay Khari-tonov of the Communist Party, got 4.31%. The country saw a record turnout of 77.44% and the results showed that Russia "is united" under the long-time leader, according to Ella Pamfilova, the CEC chief. In all practical sense, it was a carefully managed election that would have only one possible outcome. Only Kremlin-tolerated candidates were allowed to stand contest. Those critical of Mr. Putin's policies were barred on technical grounds. The state had also passed legislation in the election run-up criminalising any criticism of the Ukraine war. For Mr. Putin, who faces international criticism over the war, the election was an opportunity to tell the world that the country was united behind his leadership.

Over the years, Mr. Putin, 71, has mastered a complex model of a tightly-held state with regular elections and little dissent. To his credit, he remains a popular leader. For many Russians, he rebuilt the state in the early 2000s after the "decade of humiliation" of the 1990s that followed the collapse of the USSR. Statism, rooted in Orthodox Christian conservative values, replaced the state-sanctioned communism of the Soviet years. He stood up to the West, seeking to restore Russia's great power glory. He brought wars with Russian territories to an end, ensured economic and political stability and expanded the country's borders with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. But he also turned the state into a militaristic, authoritarian machinery that sought complete dominance at home and counterbalancing against the West abroad. Two of his most vocal political opponents are gone - Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny - while several others are in jail. The media have been muzzled. And state institutions have practically become branches of the Kremlin. With his sweeping victory, Mr. Putin will likely project further strength and preserve the status quo. But the meticulous way in which the regime staged the election, with the goal of bolstering Mr. Putin's numbers, and its overzealous attempt to stamp out even the slightest dissent expose the underlying weakness rather than endorsing the strongman image that hangs on the facade of the regime Mr. Putin has built.

# Violence, homelessness, and women's mental health

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) presents a sobering picture of the pervasive violence against women in India. Almost 30% of women between the ages of 18-49 years have experienced physical violence beginning at age 15; 6% reported sexual violence. Evidence indicates that violence and mental health conditions have a reciprocal, cause-and-effect relationship, and both factors significantly heighten the risk of homelessness. In the three decades of working with homeless women with mental health conditions at The Banyan, we have witnessed this recursive interaction between violence against women, homelessness, and mental health almost universally.

### Findings of relevance

A survey of 346 women accessing outpatient services at The Banyan found that relational disruptions, often in the background of violence, predicted homelessness, even when women had accessed care for their mental health - a finding that is mirrored in other studies globally. Another qualitative research that examined user accounts of trauma drawn from women with histories of homelessness showed that descriptions of experiences relating to violence in social relationships, experience of alienation and shame, and poverty did not entirely match with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* conceptualisations of trauma.

Qualitative interviews with several women living with mental health conditions detail their journeys into homelessness, not merely as a deficit in access to care but also as an escape and possible liberation from repeated cycles of unremitting violence - whether it was from a predatory father, a husband who controlled all aspects of life or an aunt who issued threats to sell into slavery to pay for meals. A recurrent theme that emerged was the impact of child sexual abuse and intimate partner violence on individual mental health and homelessness.

At age 5, Leela began understanding what it meant to be a (child of a) homeless woman living with mental illness. Her mother, Jaya, fled an abusive family home with only Leela, leaving her older siblings behind. Desperate and hearing voices, Jaya contemplated ending their suffering by jumping from a train but was dissuaded by Leela, who did not fully understand her mother's motives but was consumed by an ominous feeling of desperation and crippling fear. Throughout their homelessness, the duo faced the arduous task of survival, finding food and safe spaces to rest every day. Jaya's deformed hand is a reminder of the violence they experienced on the streets.

With a multifactorial matrix of structural barriers such as poverty and caste, violence and associated feelings of loss of agency feature prominently amongst reasons that precipitate an exit from typical relational bonds and conventional notions of home assumed to provide safety, a sense of community, and belongingness. Ellen Corrin's work offers a



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Many of the manifestations of mental ill-health appear to be embedded in the reality of adverse life events

nanced perspective on the phenomenon of social withdrawal in the context of schizophrenia that challenges reductionist views around the construction of negative symptoms. Instead of an overt focus on alignment with the social environment, her work shifts the emphasis to considering meanings and personal experiences behind behaviours often labelled as symptoms of the disorder, and situating mental illness and related symptoms within 'a life frame'. The same lens can be used to approach intersecting issues of women's mental health, homelessness, and violence.

### An umbrella-like label

Historically, the label of madness has been used to discredit, subjugate, and silence women who are seen as demonstrating undesirable traits - intellectual curiosity, assertiveness, and autonomy. From the witch trials in the Middle Ages to the incarceration of women in asylums, resistance to oppression and refusal to comply with expected norms were labelled as missteps due to a deranged imagination. In contemporary patriarchal society, the social construct of womanhood continues to be carefully curated and enforced, confining women and their value within reproductive roles and docile submission to various forms of violence, routinely normalised and justified. Madness in this context then becomes not an individuated pathology but a response to the continued violence against women.

Some women describe their madness as resistance, as a defiant embrace of what is taboo for women, an opportunity to break free from coerced identities and assume new personas that transcend patriarchal norms. Others describe their madness as a solace in beliefs such as being the mother of 100 male children or transforming into a goddess with special powers by performing a complex ritual. In the process, some lay claim to an elevated sense of purpose and accruing cultural capital that society places significant value on and associates with improved status. While others may find escape in an idea or imagination to battle the shame, fear and devaluation. And, yet, some other women experience their madness as a journey inward, where voice hearing and altered perceptions become portals to alternate realities where they can engage in a spiritual interrogation of who they are without social constraints.

In contrast to these multifaceted descriptions of madness in the context of violence, the mainstream discourse on women's mental health is dominated by a narrow focus on higher prevalence rates of depression, anxiety or eating disorders, or mental health needs associated with the prescribed reproductive role such as postpartum depression. All these deserve attention but not in a manner that isolates these experiences from the larger narrative. Women's experiences of distress are often viewed through a reductionist biomedicine-dominated lens, neglecting the insidious impact of violence that women endure and absolving society of its

complicity. Navigating mental health and social care systems that mirror these biases, in the background of poverty and caste-based marginalisation, takes a profound toll, elevating risks of homelessness. In our experience, women often encounter health systems that dismiss their lived experience, focusing largely on symptoms and diagnoses that are to be treated and eliminated. In contrast, our experience suggests that many of the manifestations of mental ill-health are embedded in the reality of adverse life events. In this context, investments cannot be confined to increasing proximal access to mental health care without collective action that can substantively address deep-rooted violence.

There is an urgent need, therefore, to develop comprehensive solutions based on a systematic unpacking of multiple factors and their interactions that perpetrate violence against women. Recognising and compensating women for their unpaid labour in household roles and creating the space for women to find supportive networks and alternate family structures outside of typical heteronormative relationships may offer security and refuge. Ensuring access to basic income, housing, and land ownership may offer economic independence and reduce vulnerability to homelessness. Embedding in the education environment, a curriculum that helps growing adolescents interrogate and challenge harmful gendered norms may help foster a generation that values egalitarian norms and rejects all forms of violence against women.

Biological scientist Robert Sapolsky contends that our inclinations, actions, and choices are not products of an autonomous, conscious process of free will but rather shaped by biological factors such as our genes, neural circuitry, and brain chemistry. His work emphasises the role of childhood adversity - abuse, neglect, and poverty - and the profound effects these have on the developing brain, underscoring the need for policies and interventions that reduce violence beginning in the formative years.

### Adopt a multifaceted approach

While the two-way relationship between homelessness and mental illness is recognised globally, we need to scrutinise the nuances more closely. Violence against women is one factor that may not receive enough attention in this context. Instead of addressing root causes rhetorically, we should examine the complex strands surrounding mental health. This journey requires opening up to new avenues, involving diverse professionals, innovative research, and meaningful involvement of those with lived experiences. Prioritising a range of robust responses can better address the plurality of needs, especially for high-priority groups such as homeless women. No single narrative makes for a complete response. Greater exploration of phenomena and their influence on mental health, the role of intersectionality, power asymmetries, and the use of feminist standpoint theory in advancing science and ways of knowing are needed. The absence of such a multifaceted approach represents the greatest lacuna.

# The MIRV leap that fires up India's nuclear deterrence

The Agni-5 ballistic missile test dubbed the "Divyastra", that was conducted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), is strategically consequential. With a range of over 5,000 kilometres, the Agni-5 is the longest-range missile India has tested so far. But it is not simply its range but, equally, its potency which represents a watershed moment for India's nuclear deterrent. The potency of India's nuclear deterrent is enhanced because this variant is integrated with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs).

### A comparison with China

Though MIRV technology is not new, it is to India. The five designated nuclear weapons states - the United States, Russia, the People's Republic of China, France and the United Kingdom - already possess MIRV capable projectiles which are integrated into their respective nuclear arsenals. India has joined a very select group of countries to develop an MIRV ballistic missile.

MIRV-tipped missiles are a necessity simply because they strike multiple targets simultaneously and help evade ballistic missile defences. China is building ballistic missile defences such as the Hongqi (HQ-19) ground-based ballistic missile interceptors, which have been tested, but their capacity to intercept Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) such as the Agni-5 is still suspect. It is, nevertheless, progressing steadily. The HQ-19s would eventually have the range to intercept the earlier variants of the Agni IRBM, especially when configured to carry only a single warhead. Ballistic missile defences paired to a growing Chinese nuclear arsenal would have significantly eroded India's nuclear striking power as it would bequeath to China a strong damage limitation capability, especially if the Chinese were to carry



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As a China-specific missile, the successful test of the Agni-5 MIRV missile enables India to reach a milestone

out a nuclear first strike against India. Now that India has integrated the Agni-5 with multiple warheads, greater balance has been restored in the Sino-Indian nuclear deterrent relationship. To be sure, more testing of the MIRV-capable Agni-5 will be required to render the Indian nuclear ballistic missile arsenal more credible as the end-user - the Indian armed services are unlikely to be satisfied with a single test.

### Demanding requirements

Building MIRV-capable ballistic missiles is not easy. This is because it requires meeting some very demanding technical criteria, such as nuclear warhead miniaturisation, ensuring that the receptacle that carries the warhead or re-entry vehicle is of low weight or mass before its release from the Post Boost Vehicle (PBV), and also having the re-entry vehicles configured precisely to fit into the missile as well their separation from the PBV, which has to be manoeuvrable. Guidance and accuracy are a necessity as re-entry vehicles have to be spin stabilised during atmospheric re-entry. A MIRV-based missile can only strike multiple targets that are within its ambit or geographic footprint. With the recent Agni-5 test, India has met these demanding technical requirements. In India's case, this MIRV development is all the more significant and impressive because it has come against considerable odds stacked against the country's missile and nuclear engineers.

First, inadequate nuclear testing by New Delhi compromised the extent to which it could miniaturise warheads and MIRV them to strike multiple targets. Second, the lack of sufficient testing also undermined the extent to which the re-entry vehicles could be designed to carry the warheads. The DRDO and all its key associate agencies such as the Terminal Ballistics Research Laboratory (TBRL) responsible for integrating

warheads with missiles and the Advanced Systems Limited (ASL) as this test of the Agni-5 visibly demonstrated, have overcome these challenges. The opacity surrounding this MIRV missile is about the number of warheads it can carry, which in all likelihood would remain classified. Going by speculation, it is improbable that it can carry more than three warheads. Further, the yield of the nuclear warheads is likely to be limited due to the small number of atomic tests India has conducted. In addition, it is unclear whether the Agni-5 can carry decoys and chaff, especially during the boost and intermediate phase of the missile's flight. Agni-5 will in all probability be launched from a road mobile platform.

### Other projects ahead

Chinese missile defence interceptors will likely subject the Agni-5 to mid-course interception. Nevertheless, the Atomic Energy Commission of India, especially the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), which is directly responsible for core Research and Development (R&D) with respect to nuclear devices, have done a good job in designing sufficiently compact nuclear warheads for MIRV capability. This is a China-specific missile. There could be more to come from the DRDO and AEC with India adding more punch to its nuclear arsenal when it tests a long-range Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), which India's nuclear ballistic missile submarines can launch. The Agni-5 with MIRV capability bolsters India's nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis China. It puts China on notice - that India is preparing itself to counter the advances Beijing has made with its missile and missile defence programmes. With the successful test of the Agni-5 MIRV missile, India has crossed a key benchmark in its march to become a highly credible nuclear and missile power.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Wayanad contest, options

I write this as Secretary and Correspondent, The Quaide Milletteh College for Men, Chennai, as an open letter to Rahul Gandhi, Congress leader. It is disappointing to learn that you have chosen, again, to contest from the Wayanad constituency in

Kerala in the general election, against Ms. Annie Raja, leader of the CPI and the General Secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association. The LDF and the UDF are the two main alliances to contest against each other in Kerala though they are

both the pillars of the INDIA bloc. The Left parties are always in the forefront when it is about fighting fascist forces such as the BJP and establishing a just government based on the high principles of democracy and the rule of law. As a lead party leader

of the Congress, you have various options before you to get elected safely. Though it is essential that you are successfully elected to lead the government, it is also very important that there is the presence of very strong Left Members in Parliament to safely run the

government. As the grandson of Quaide Milletteh Mohamed Isamil Sahib, founder president of the IUML, I am associated with the electorate in the Malabar area in Kerala for over five decades. I can say with some knowledge of the electorate, that there could

be a swing in favour of the CPI leader. I request you to contest from one of the many safe constituencies in Tamil Nadu, where we will ensure a thumping majority for you. **M.G. Dawood Miakhan,** Chennai



## The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY  
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# Hybrid Pakistan

India will be in no hurry to do business with its new management. Onus of rapprochement lies on Pakistan



AJAY BISARIA

## FULLER DISCLOSURE

SBI must not wait for Court to prod it, parties must step forward to place more information on electoral bonds in public domain

THE DATA ON electoral bonds released by the State Bank of India must provide clarity on questions that are at the heart of the effort to bring transparency in political funding. It should give information on all the entities, companies and/or individuals, who purchased electoral bonds, which parties received them and when, and the link between the two — that is, who paid whom. The disclosures so far by the SBI, however, have only provided information on the donors who purchased the bonds and the parties that received them — the question of who paid whom remains unanswered. This information gap can be filled, firstly, by the State Bank of India furnishing data on the bond's unique alphanumeric code and serial number — not provided so far by the bank. On Monday, the Supreme Court asked the SBI to disclose these numbers for the bonds purchased and redeemed to the Election Commission. The Court has also asked the Chairman and Managing Director of the SBI to file an affidavit by March 21 stating that all information regarding the bonds has been disclosed. The court's continued push to ensure complete transparency is immensely welcome. But having said that, the SBI should now disclose all the information it has and not wait for the Court's prodding.

Some political parties have taken a step forward towards providing information on bonds. Reportedly, 10 parties, including the DMK, NCP, JD(U) and AAP, have voluntarily disclosed the names of their donors. For instance, Future Gaming and Hotel Services — the biggest purchaser with over Rs 1,300 crore worth of bonds between 2019 and 2024 — donated Rs 509 crore or just under 40 per cent of its total purchases to the DMK. Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Ltd — the second largest purchaser of bonds — gave Rs 50 crore to JD(S). This was more than half of what the party received through this channel. Other parties must now take the cue and place more information in the public domain. At this moment, the onus is on parties to rise above short-term calculations and considerations and take forward the process started by the Court — of shining light on areas of darkness in a system that is mostly opaque.

The system of electoral financing in India is in dire need of reform, keeping at its centre the voter's right to know. This valuable opportunity must not be lost. But even full disclosures on electoral bonds cannot be the end of the matter. The next step will need to be taken — to set in place a more open system to replace the electoral bonds scheme struck down by the Court. There can be no going back to the earlier system. Conversations must begin on bringing in systemic changes and they must involve all stakeholders and parties.

## MOB ON CAMPUS

Best universities in the world foster freedom. Attack on foreign students in Gujarat University belies NEP 2020's promise

AS THE WORLD is becoming increasingly interconnected," says the National Education Policy (2020), it is the responsibility of institutes of higher education to "become active promoters of more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, secure, and sustainable societies". The attack on five foreign students on Saturday night at Gujarat University in Ahmedabad by a mob, reportedly for offering namaz during Ramzan, flies in the face of that commitment and promise. In videos of the incident, about 25 young men can be seen assaulting the students, two of whom were hospitalised. The response from the authorities has been two-toned. First, dealing with the crime itself, the breach of law and order on campus. Two people have been arrested and the Ministry of External Affairs has issued a statement saying it is in touch with the Gujarat government on the matter. The second response, unfortunately, appears to lay blame on the victims.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Vice-Chancellor Neerja Gupta has assured the foreign students — from Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and African nations — that they will be moved to a different hostel. That this has become necessary for their safety is disturbing. But the VC's words also appear to rule out the possibility of an introspection on how and why the students were attacked: "They are foreign students and when they go to foreign countries there is a need to be culturally sensitive. From this incident it has emerged that there is still a need for cultural orientation." The onus of being "culturally sensitive", especially in terms of religious and cultural practices, has been put on the foreign students. It would seem, in this framing, that the mob that attacked them has been let off far too lightly.

The best universities in the world are spaces that, first and foremost, foster freedom. The quality of education they offer depends crucially on the liberty of thought and freedom of debate that they play host to. The mob and its violence bring an end to the free exchange of ideas and, by extension, the idea of the university. Gujarat University would do well to heed the advice of NEP 2020: To ensure "scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, equality, and justice", it is necessary to nurture a campus that has "full equity and inclusion as the cornerstone of all educational decisions".

## LIFE AND TIMES

Biopics have become a formula, offering prestige and instant publicity. But does the audience want more of the same?

ACTOR OF luminous beauty, with impeccable comic timing and a slew of successes, who is also one of Indian cinema's great tragic figures because of her doomed love life and early death: There is little doubt that the story of Madhubala would make for a compelling film. The announcement of a biopic of the actor, helmed by Jasmeet H Reen — director of the 2022 film *Darlings* — should, then, be cheering news. Yet, the general quality of biopics — a genre that seems to have become a Bollywood favourite since the box office success of Bhaag Milkha Bhaag in 2013 — gives pause and elicits the question: What makes a good biopic?

The straightforward answer, of course, is that a good biopic is one that is not a hagiography. It is a film that attempts honesty, and resists the temptation to present its protagonist as an infallible or flawless figure. This, unfortunately, is where so many films falter, including recent releases such as Sam Bahadur, about Sam Manekshaw, and Main Atal Hoon, about Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Mere biographical details cannot be the anchor for a biopic. Perspective and the understanding that the great figures of history cannot be separated from their times are, perhaps, of greater importance. Could Vajpayee's story, for instance, have been used to tell a broader story of the India in which he rose to power and which he undoubtedly helped shape?

The real trouble, however, is that the biopic has increasingly become a comfortable formula, offering a ready-made story, a halo of prestige and instant publicity. Does the audience want more of the same? Going by the slew of biopics in the pipeline for this year, including films on Sourav Ganguly, Sambhaji Maharaj, Jhulan Goswami and Indira Gandhi, nobody in Bollywood seems to be asking that question.

IN THE AFTERMATH of the brazenly rigged elections of February 8, Pakistan has unveiled a new parliament, government and cabinet of ministers, in a spectacle carefully choreographed by its military establishment. The latest coalition government is headed by Shehbaz Sharif, the pliant politician who did the army's bidding in the 16-month Pakistan Democratic Movement government that replaced the government led by Imran Khan but was disbanded for the elections. The astute Asif Ali Zardari is back for a second term as president. Maryam Nawaz is taking her first stab at governance as Chief Minister of Punjab. Her father, the thrice-deposed PM, Nawaz Sharif, has been sidelined, under the looming threat of losing his Lahore parliamentary seat to a recount of votes.

The victor of the elections, Imran Khan, languishes in Adiala jail, now forbidden from running his post-election politics from there. The army has achieved its objective of a "minus Imran" and "minus Nawaz" political landscape, even if Army Chief Asim Munir's political tricks department could not stop the voters from giving a tantalising glimpse of an alternate universe, where Imran Khan's PTI would have won and run the government.

In dealing with the pain of a stolen mandate, Pakistan's commentariat recalled three past elections. The only free and fair ones, in 1970, led to the break-up of the country, when they awarded the majority to the Awami League and its jailed Bengali leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leading the largely Punjabi army to conclude that the people of Pakistan could not be trusted with free elections. The 1977 elections, rigged by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, led to Zia ul-Haq's coup and held the lesson that rigging was a science that could not be left to the civilians alone, it needed to be supervised by the army. In 2018, the army refined the art of pre-poll engineering to create a "hybrid" regime with the then compliant Imran Khan. It deployed that model again in

2024, failing to factor in public discontent. The newspaper, *Dawn*, pointed out that "though the people of Pakistan managed to deny the powerful (army) what they wanted, the powerful also managed to deny the people the outcome they wanted".

The peculiar caretaker system that Pakistan deploys ostensibly for the conduct of free elections, effectively became a vehicle for the army's manipulation of the polls. In a thinly veiled assertion of political supremacy, the army's corps commanders met a couple of days after the new PM was sworn in to issue an expansive statement. The army's top body gave itself a clean chit, dismissing criticism of rigging as "malicious efforts to create distortions, confusion and disinformation" and asking the people "to remain positive and united", to forget the pilfering of their mandate as a bad dream. The army will ensure dissenting Pakistanis don't take to the streets.

In a corporate analogy, the army chief is the powerful CEO presiding over a board of army corps commanders. This cohort has selected Shehbaz as the Chief Operating Officer, and Zardari as the largely ceremonial Managing Director. While the board will dictate security and foreign policy, the COO has the mandate to keep up the pressure on the jailed (former COO) Imran Khan and to steady the economy with a 6 billion-dollar IMF loan. The technocrat CFO approved by the board, banker Muhammad Aurangzeb, is tasked to secure the next IMF bailout and push for reforms. The shareholders — the populace — find themselves marginalised, with little agency in steering the nation's trajectory.

Shehbaz has on reviewing the economy expressed shock, calling it a crisis "higher than the Himalaya". The IMF would require tough reforms: Increasing energy prices and privatising bleeding public sector firms like steel mills and the national carrier PIA. A key structural reform — removing the generals from economic management — is above the pay grade

of the IMF but should be on the agenda of Pakistan's overseas mentors. India has cautioned the IMF that Pakistan should not use the 24th IMF programme to put cash into the army's kitty or to repay Chinese debt.

The army can be expected to double down on containing the "Imran challenge", bottling his over 90 independent legislators, perhaps even pressing Imran into a deal to quietly move to the "sub-jail" at his Bani Gala residence. The hybrid government can be expected to be shored up by the army for at least 18 months, when Asim Munir comes up for a second term and may wish to stir the cauldron to ensure his extension. He could then crown Bilawal Bhutto, eagerly waiting in the wings, as PM, fulfilling a Bhutto family dream.

India's reaction has been a perfunctory tweet from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which makes it clear that India has no views on Pakistan's flawed polls. India will focus on its own elections, while watching Pakistan with strategic patience. PM Modi made an even stronger statement with his "winning hearts" tour of the Kashmir Valley, aimed at reaping the post-Article 370 peace dividend. As he delivered a healing touch and a development promise, he made no mention of Pakistan or its export of terror.

Gone are the days when India would conflate its approaches to Pakistan and Kashmir; the welfare of Kashmir is an internal matter, while dealing with Pakistan is a foreign policy challenge, and the twain will now not meet. India will be in no tearing hurry to do business with the new management of Hybrid Pakistan; the onus lies on its new leaders to seek board approval for creative rapprochement.

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SHRUTI JOSHI AND ANSHUMAN KAMILA

## A BANK ACCOUNT OF HER OWN

NFHS data offers clues on ways to bring more women under financial inclusion schemes

FINANCIAL INCLUSION IS essential for a nation's sustained development and growth. Its importance in building a sustainable and inclusive future is evident from the significance attached to financial inclusion in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Financial inclusion is seen as an enabler of eight out of the 17 SDGs. India has a below-average score in economy in the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 — health, education and politics are the other criteria in this report. The criteria on economy also deal with the gender gap in economic participation and opportunity — this is measured in terms of labour force participation rate and estimated earned income, *inter alia*. Financial inclusion of women helps to close these gaps. Therefore, taking stock is imperative.

As per the World Bank's Global Findex Database 2021, adult ownership of bank accounts or regulated institutions such as a credit union, microfinance institutions or a mobile money service provider has increased globally by 50 percentage points between 2011 to 2020. The increase in India has also been impressive, with a jump of 42 percentage points in this period. Moreover, the gender gap in account ownership has also closed substantially in India. In this context, the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, launched in 2014, made a significant impact in enabling the opening of basic savings bank accounts, *inter alia*, for over 28 crore women (as of January 2024). Further, financial inclusion has received a fillip through steps taken to boost the participation of women in the economy — these include the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana, the National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM), skill training under Skill India Mission, Mission Shakti and social protection schemes

such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana.

Using multiple rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), we have found more dimensions of steady progress in the financial inclusion of women in India. It is heartening that in crucial criteria such as sovereignty over a certain sum of money, possessing a self-operated bank account, awareness about micro-credit programmes and availing of micro-credit schemes, women have clocked gains over the past two decades.

NFHS data also reveal several individual and household characteristics that have an impact on women's access to financial services. Using NFHS 5 data, collected during 2019-21 for 5.44 lakh women respondents in rural India, we identified the drivers of ownership and usage of accounts at a formal financial institution, usage of mobile phones for digital modes of payment and knowledge and utilisation of micro-credit programmes.

We found that education, skills (particularly digital skills), occupation, access to electronic media and age were significant drivers of financial inclusion among women. For instance, we found that educated women were more likely to know about the micro-credit schemes in their locality. Women with primary and secondary education were more likely to take a loan from these programmes, whereas women with higher education were less likely to use these programmes as opposed to women with no education. This is reasonable because although women with higher education are likely to be aware of and have the wherewithal to access formal channels of credit and lending, micro-credit schemes typically target women with low levels of education — such women find it hard

to negotiate formal banking relationships even though they are creditworthy in terms of their entrepreneurial ability. We found that working women in general — irrespective of their occupation group — were more likely to know about these loan programmes and avail them. Educated, digitally skilled, young and employed women were more likely to use digital modes of transaction. We also found that the gender of the head of the household and the assets and wealth he or she has, influences access to micro-credit.

This study throws up some important learnings to fine-tune our approach and increase financial inclusion. NFHS data suggests that women in women-headed households are favourably placed in owning and using a bank account, in using their mobile phone for digital financial transactions and in accessing micro-credit. Therefore, financial inclusion awareness programmes must give special attention to women in households not headed by women. Similarly, since skills and education positively impact financial inclusion, it would be advisable to incorporate modules on financial awareness in education and skill development frameworks. Given the shifting sands and novel developments in the financial sector, such modules must be updated regularly. The increasing use of digital financial transactions among the youth has lent greater urgency to the need to disseminate awareness about cyber safety and safe digital banking practices, especially so given the rising trend of financial cyber-crimes and frauds.

Joshi is with the Reserve Bank of India and Kamila is with the Indian Economic Service. Views are personal

## MARCH 19, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

### CALCUTTA VIOLENCE

FOUR PEOPLE, INCLUDING Deputy Commissioner of Police (Port Division) V K Mehta and his security guard were killed in violent incidents in Calcutta. They were killed by a rioting mob and another person died when the police fired to disperse the mob. A day-long curfew has been imposed as a precautionary measure.

nounced Shanti Patel, MP and president, All India Port and Dock Workers' Federation. Patel remarked that the government's declaration of the strike as illegal "has only strengthened the resolve to fight till victory is achieved." He appealed to PM Indira Gandhi not to make the issue one of prestige.

### VIOLENCE IN PUNJAB

TWO PERSONS WERE shot dead and 11 others injured as terrorist activities continued unabated in different parts of Punjab. The two were gunned down by miscreants in a Firozpur-bound passenger train on the Ludhiana-Firozpur section of the Northern

Railway. The terrorists also robbed some 30 passengers of their valuables. The police arrested 32 persons on charges of violating prohibitory orders under Section 144 CrPC.

### LABOURERS SHOT DEAD

EIGHT LANDLESS LABOURERS, mostly Harijans and Yadavas, were shot dead in the Lahsuna village of Masaurhi sub-division of Patna district. Reports alleged that the landholders' henchmen had done this to get even with the local Kisan Majdoor Samiti which was suspected to have been responsible for the killing of two landholders of the area in the first week of March.





C.R. Sasikumar

## When the taps run dry

To reimagine Bengaluru's waterscape, it is essential to rebuild our lost relationship with the many meanings of water



SEEMA MUNDOLI

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ON the water crisis Bengaluru has been experiencing read like the pages of an apocalyptic thriller. People leaving the city for their hometowns as the taps have run dry; residents of apartments lining up to use toilet facilities in malls; bone-dry borewells; unaffordable rates charged by water tankers. Adding to the panic are the circulars issued with the threat of fines if potable water is used in swimming pools, for watering plants and washing cars, and legal consequences for drilling private borewells.

The India Meteorological Department had said that the 2023 monsoon had been below normal owing to the El Nino impact, contributing to the current water crisis. Forecasts predict that the monsoon, when it arrives, could be normal. But as we have seen in previous years, this could also mean just more bad news — waterlogging and flooding causing chaos and panic again.

We can no longer ask the question: What is wrong with the climate of Bengaluru? It is time to ask ourselves — what is wrong with us when it comes to imagining the waterscape of this metropolitan city? Perhaps this is a good time to reflect on three Rs — our relationship, our rights, and our responsibilities—when it comes to water in Bengaluru.

Bengaluru was once known as *Kalyana Nagara* or the City of Lakes. These lakes or *keres* were carved out of depressions in the landscape by human ingenuity and hard labour, and rainwater was directed into these depressions via *rajakaluves* (channels). Lakes were constructed in a series, with overflow from upstream lakes flowing into the lakes downstream, with the wetlands around the lakes helping groundwater recharge. In proximity to the lakes were several smaller water bodies, for example, *kalyanis* (temple ponds),

*baavis* (wells/stepwells), and *gokattes* (ponds for washing cattle). The lakes supported livelihoods such as grazing and fodder collection, fishing, and agriculture. *Nagarkallus* (snake stones) and shrines on the lake bund were worshipped by the local communities. Children and adults spent afternoons swimming in these lakes, while women foraged for greens that they included in the family meals. Thus, the lakes were central to the economic, cultural, and social lives of the local community.

But this almost idyllic waterscape that supported different kinds of use and was of immense ecological significance has undergone massive changes. Beginning in colonial times, many of these water sources were converted to different kinds of land use, a practice which continued after Independence. Thus, lakes became bus stands and stadiums. Ponds were filled for building homes. Wells fell to disuse. The transformation of the city into India's software capital, beginning in the 1990s, came at an especially huge cost. Buildings have come up where once wetlands were located, and the area covered by lakes has also reduced. The channels that enabled the flow of water between upstream and downstream lakes were encroached or filled up. The few remaining lakes, which were once seasonal, have become perennial — perennially filled with sewage water and garbage dumped from homes, hospitals, and business establishments.

As the city urbanised, the need for water increased — but the supply was marked by inequity. The affluent layouts and apartment complexes in the city's core were connected through the municipal piped water system. In the peripheral areas that did not have access to municipal water, the water tankers filled the gap. At the same time, both in the centre of the city and the periphery, the slums and layouts where the poor lived struggled to get sufficient water even for basic needs such as drinking, cooking and sanitation. Thus, the right to water, a fundamental human right, has been denied to a large population of urban poor.

Meanwhile, it is the mandate of the government to provide safe and sufficient water to all. With the local water bodies lost to a rapidly urbanising Bengaluru, water for the city has been brought in from the Cauvery

As the city urbanised, the need for water increased — but the supply was marked by inequity. The affluent layouts and apartment complexes in the city's core were connected through the municipal piped water system. In the peripheral areas that did not have access to municipal water, the water tankers filled the gap. At the same time, both in the centre of the city and the periphery, the slums and layouts where the poor lived struggled to get sufficient water even for basic needs such as drinking, cooking and sanitation. Thus, the right to water, a fundamental human right, has been denied to a large population of urban poor.

river more than a hundred kilometres away. Supplementing this is water from the Arkavathi river, and water pumped from government owned borewells. Laws, guidelines, and schemes related to rainwater harvesting, sinking private borewells and treatment of sewage water have been introduced over the years with the objective of conserving water. The responsibility of the government and the citizens when it comes to water is thus laid out, to some extent. However, the failure in dealing with the responsibility is evident in the extreme water scarcity Bengaluru is facing today.

It is time for the city and its residents to reflect on the three Rs.

First, reworking our relationship with water. This will require that the city and its residents reconnect with water in ways the generations earlier did — making the remnant lakes, ponds, and wells central to the social and cultural lives of the city, and wherever possible also to support the livelihoods of those who continue to depend on these water bodies, such as fishers, grazers, and foragers. Second, addressing the inequity in access to water. We cannot have a section of the city's population using water to fill their swimming pools while another section, a considerable majority at that, struggles to get safe and sufficient water even for their basic needs. Water is a shared resource, a right of every resident of the city — not just of the affluent. Third, if water is a right, then each of us needs to be responsible for its sustainable use. The city and its residents need to be conscious of where every drop of water comes from, how and how much water is used, how much can be recycled and what is the best use of sewage water.

Today, Bengaluru's association with water seems to be caught in an endless cycle of dealing with scarcity and flooding. There is water scarcity now. Once the monsoon starts, the fear of flooding will grip the city. Bengaluru needs to move away from this continuous negative, and stress-inducing, association with water by committing to the three Rs — building our lost relationship with the many meanings of water; ensuring equal right to water for all; and being responsible for every single drop of water we use.

The writer is faculty at Azim Premji University

## WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"The world cannot continue to remain silent and watch the complete annihilation of the Palestinian people. Israel has been able to create the narrative that criticising [it] should be considered *ipso facto* antisemitic. It's time for the Western countries to take meaningful action to end Israel's aggression." — THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

## Towards a less divided polity

One Nation One Election will encourage cooperative federalism, with national and state parties and governments working in alignment



ABHINAV PRAKASH

THE HIGH-LEVEL COMMITTEE on One Nation One Election (ONOE), headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, submitted its report on simultaneous polls to President Droupadi Murmu on March 14. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also often talked about the need to synchronise the national and state elections to strengthen both the democratic structure and governance in India. In fact, in the initial decades after Independence, elections to the House of People and state legislative assemblies were simultaneous. However, over the course of time, dissolution of the Houses before the expiry of the tenure — both in the case of the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies (Under Articles 83 and 172 of the Constitution of India) and imposition of President's Rule under Article 356 — disrupted the cycle.

Elections in the states and the Centre fell out of step, and successive governments made no systematic attempts to change the situation. Consequently, the present situation has evolved, and every year, several state elections are being conducted. It seems that Indian democracy has become a perpetual election cycle and elections have become an end unto themselves. This has several consequences for governance, financial resources, and democracy itself.

Given the size of India and its burgeoning population, even state elections are costly affairs involving elaborate logistic and security measures. Significant resources are directed towards conducting elections, which can be better utilised if elections are consolidated in a single process. The state of Uttar Pradesh had elections in 2022, involving massive deployment of administrative and security machinery. Now, in 2024, the same process will be repeated, this time for the Lok Sabha election. Simultaneous elections would have enabled efficient and economical utilisation of the resources apart from ensuring that the administration is more focused on governance than just managing elections every two years.

ONOE would also give political parties, especially those in the government, breathing space to focus on long-term policies instead of short-term populist measures. One of the major threats to the democratic process and ethos is electoral corruption. Of late, several parties have been promising freebies and populist measures instead of their governance track record during elections to manipulate voters. Simultaneous elections will curtail the scope for such irresponsible politics, which is already putting an unbearable strain on state resources and impairing growth prospects.

ONOE will also reduce election fatigue among voters, thus increasing active participation in the electoral process and ensuring higher voter turnout. The quality of a democracy depends on the discourse within it.

Frequent polls and the highly competi-

tive nature of Indian elections unfortunately lead to negative campaigning based on caste, religion and regional polarisation by several political actors. The issues of policy and governance often get sidelined, with attempts being made to charge up the electorate with emotional appeals and false propaganda. One can hope that simultaneous elections will reduce divisiveness and compel political parties and various actors to discuss their long-term vision and agenda for the betterment of their constituencies.

Any policy change or systemic reform invariably leads to some sections of society losing out on their privileges. Frequent elections act as a deterrent for political parties to form a consensus to undertake such an overhaul, even if they all agree on the importance of it. ONOE will enable the government to enact bold policy measures to address critical issues like pollution, and climate change and reforms like labour laws and agricultural laws, which might create short-term pain for long-term gain.

One of the many constraints on economic growth in India is the policy arbitrariness, inconsistency and socialist populism adopted by several sections of the political class to win elections. ONOE promotes stability in the government, which will improve governance and the climate for business, boosting investor confidence. Opponents of ONOE argue that it will undermine federalism. But simultaneous elections were the norm in the initial decades of Independence with no demonstrable damage to federalism. In fact, simultaneous elections may encourage a more cooperative federalism with national and state parties and governments working in close and synchronised alignment. It has greater potential for governments at different levels to collaborate more closely on policy implementation, as they would be elected at the same time and possibly for the same duration. It can lead to a more integrated approach to addressing national and state issues.

The concerns about regional issues getting overshadowed by national issues are also misplaced. First, Indian voters have demonstrated time and again that they can distinguish between national, state and local elections, even if they are conducted simultaneously or at short intervals. Secondly, the reverse may also be true — parties may be forced to prioritise regional issues and concerns along with national issues. The result could be a more balanced political discourse as no political party, be it regional or national, can afford to be indifferent to national or regional issues.

One of the most important recommendations of the Kovind panel is that elections to municipalities and panchayats should be synchronised with the elections to the House of the People and state legislative assemblies and should be conducted within 100 days of national and state elections. It has the potential to finally systematise, revitalise and empower local governance, something which has eluded the third tier of the government. It will truly strengthen the grassroots democracy and empower the citizenry like never before. The report will undoubtedly serve as the basis of future discussions on the issue of One Nation, One Election.

The writer is national vice-president, BJP youth wing

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### GUARANTEES AROUND

THIS REFERS TO the, 'Freeze frame' by E P Unny (IE, March 18). The political parties contesting the Lok Sabha elections 2024 seem to be first in the history of the country to employ guarantees as a major incentive for voters. After free electricity, water, Wifi, ration and transport, declaration of cash incentives are the latest competition among parties. Women have been promised amounts ranging from Rs 1,000 to one lakh. Guarantees seem as unpredictable as the monsoons. This is because all parties are notorious for making promises and not being able to fulfil them.

Subhash Vaid, New Delhi

### ALL EYES ON ECI

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Lok in Lok Sabha' (IE, March 18). The Election Commission of India has announced a seven-phase schedule for the Lok Sabha elections from April 19 to June 1, with counting of votes slated for June 4. We are set to witness a surge in competitive populism over the next few weeks with political parties vying to influence voters with all kinds of promises. Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains popular despite being at the helm for almost a decade, while the Opposition bloc INDIA doesn't

have a leader of his stature. As the ECI gears up for the general elections, upholding the sanctity of the democratic process is imperative. With close to a billion eligible voters poised to make their choice, the onus is on the electorate to separate fact from fiction amid misinformation, tall promises and fake news, and exercise its right responsibly. Central agencies must ensure they aid the voter's informed right to choose.

Khokan Das, Kolkata

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Lok in Lok Sabha' (IE, March 18). The ruling BJP and PM Narendra Modi will be seeking a third term based on his government's track record over the past 10 years. For the Opposition, it's a "do or die" battle after its defeat in the last two elections. Since 2019, India has witnessed rapid and massive changes, the good and the bad. Given the circumstances, the ECI has a difficult job in ensuring that the poll process is not only fair but also seen as such. In the conflict between the claim to a right to privacy by donors and the voter's right to information, the ECI's ambiguity is unwarranted. The ECI must know that all eyes are on it when it comes to assessing the biggest democratic exercise in the world. It's crucial that it contemplate its role in the process.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

The writer is a retired chief of naval staff

## War hero and pacifist

Admiral Ramdas helmed Indian Navy at a critical juncture, championed social causes



ARUN PRAKASH

ADMIRAL LAXMINARAYAN RAMDAS, PVSM, AVSM, Vrc, VSM, former chief of the naval staff, sailed into the sunset on March 15. He had lived a life in keeping with his high principles, beliefs and convictions, and many admirers mourn his demise. Born in the Tamil Brahmin neighbourhood of Matunga, Mumbai, Adm Ramdas (fondly known as "Ramu" in the navy) grew up and received his education in Delhi. Consequently, he could startle guests by switching from chaste Tamil to rustic Punjabi with felicity. Having served with distinction at every rung of the naval hierarchy, in India and abroad, he became the first Indian-trained officer (of the first course of the Joint Services Wing), to reach the apex of the Indian Navy in 1990.

In 1992, when I received orders to report to New Delhi as naval assistant to the chief of naval staff, I was shocked. The general consensus was also that the CNS had taken a risky call in picking a naval aviator with zero staff-experience as his aide. But, as I was to discover, decisiveness and a sound instinct were characteristic of Adm Ramdas. For me, this tenure in the proximity of a demanding and

cerebral chief proved to be a hugely educational experience. The 1990s were an eventful decade. No sooner had the USSR disintegrated than the US promptly made overtures for military-to-military cooperation with India. While the other services hesitated, Adm Ramdas decided that it was time for the Indian Navy (IN) to shed its insularity and initiated the first ever Indo-US naval drills in May 1992. This was the first "Exercise Malabar," whose 26th edition took place in 2023.

Malabar was shortly followed by an invitation to visit Washington. Accompanying him to interactions with the US Navy Chief, the Chairman Joint Chiefs, as well as politicians and diplomats, it was obvious to me that his intellectual depth, knowledge of international affairs and suave demeanour had won Adm Ramdas much respect and many friends, in the Pentagon as well as in Foggy Bottom.

His vision of an outward-looking Indian Navy encompassed the novel idea of an "Indian Ocean panchayat," which he mooted in many forums, but which did not, then, find favour with the diplomatic establishment. It was two years after his retirement that this

concept bore fruit; first, in the form of "Exercise Milan," which saw a gathering of five navies in Port Blair, and later as the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in 2008.

At home, the economic crisis had imposed severe budgetary constraints on the navy's operations, as well as logistics support and maintenance resources. Urging the fleets and dockyards to improvise, Adm Ramdas coined a slogan for the navy, "Much more, with much less," which inspired us to tighten our collective belts, and find innovative ways of maintaining the navy's operational tempo.

Parents of three bright daughters, the Admiral and his wife were strong advocates of gender equality and opportunities for women, causes not frequently espoused then. In November 1992, they were proud witnesses, as the Indian Navy became the first amongst Indian armed forces to commission 22 women officers in Goa.

A veteran of the 1971 war, in which he was decorated for gallantry, Adm Ramdas remained an ardent votary of nuclear restraint as well as peace and harmony in the Subcontinent. I recall his profound anguish as

news of the demolition of the Babri Masjid trickled in on December 6, 1992, and he sought an urgent meeting with then prime minister P V Narasimha Rao to convey his concerns about the maintenance of communal harmony in the country.

On doffing his uniform, Adm Ramdas made a brief foray into party politics as an anti-corruption campaigner and then retired to his rural retreat in Alibaug, Maharashtra, to serve social causes. His enduring concerns about the armed forces remained focussed on what he perceived as creeping politicisation, and the dangers of possible contagion with the communal virus.

Having ably helmed the navy at a critical juncture, when India was coming to terms with the post-Cold War era and coping with an economic crisis, he transitioned smoothly into civilian life, as a doughty crusader for social causes and for his strongly-held political beliefs. His passing leaves a void, not only for the naval fraternity, but also for his many admirers and acolytes in national life.

The writer is a retired chief of naval staff

CLOUD ON E-SCOOTER COS' CLAIM TO FAME

# Govt May Slap Recovery Suit on 3 Cos to Get Back FAME Subsidy

Hero Electric, Okinawa, Benling yet to pay back about ₹330 cr; Centre may take help of probe agency

Twesh.Mishra@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: The Centre could soon slap a recovery suit against Hero Electric, Okinawa Autotech and Benling India as the three have not paid back the subsidy they wrongfully availed under the government's flagship scheme to promote electric mobility, officials said.

The move comes after the ministry of heavy industries failed to recover the disputed amount from these com-

panies even after multiple attempts. The ministry could also seek the assistance of an investigative agency, like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) or the Enforcement Directorate, for an in depth probe into pilferage of subsidy given under the Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles (FAME) scheme and for establishing criminal intent, they said.

According to the ministry's estimates, the government is to recover around ₹155 crore from Hero Electric,

₹125 crore from Okinawa and ₹50 crore from Benling, one of the officials said, adding that the amount increases with each passing day if the company does not clear the dues.

The three are among the highest defaulters from the list of companies that were alleged to have wrongly claimed subsidy amount.

Besides the three, the government had issued recovery notices to Amper EV, Revolt Motors, Lohia Auto and AMO Mobility, all of whom have settled the issue by refunding the subsidy with penal interest, officials said.

"Companies that do not pay back the recoverable amounts are also barred from receiving subsidies in future," a second official said.

In response to queries from ET, Amit Kumar, CEO at Benling India, said: "Benling India maintains that it has diligently adhered to the guidelines and requirements set forth by the FAME II scheme".

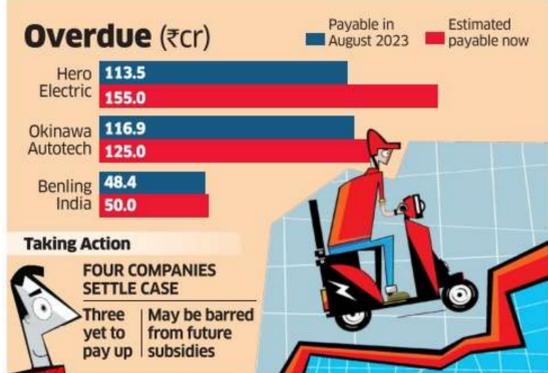
According to Kumar, Benling India sold 29,803 electric two-wheelers from June 2020 to May 2023 under the FAME II scheme. But the company received subsidy payments for just 19,986 vehicles. "The unclaimed subsidy amount of ₹42.48 crore is lying with the government," he said.

Hero Electric said they have been actively engaged in discussions regarding this matter for over 18 months now. "Our stance is publicly available, and we remain committed to resolving this issue. We have proposed various solutions for an amicable settlement already," the company told ET. "On the matter of non-compliance, we have already provided the MHI (ministry of heavy industries) with necessary information demonstrating our complete compliance with FAME and that the order in question does not apply to us at all."

Okinawa Autotech said: "The matter is currently sub judice and we await further instructions from the honourable high court". The government launched the first FAME scheme in 2015 with a budget of ₹895 crore. FAME II was rolled out in 2019 with an outlay ₹10,000 crore.

The scheme was aimed at supporting the sale of electric vehicles (EV) made in the country. Subsidy disbursements in the programme were linked to a phased manufacturing programme (PMP), which ensured higher localisation as years passed. While companies did not adhere to the PMP, they continued seeking FAME subsidy, defeating the intent of the scheme.

The government after an initial probe sent out recovery notices in the current fiscal (2023-24) totalling ₹469 crore to seven companies.



TAX HAUL TILL MARCH 15 THIS FISCAL

# I-T Recovers ₹73,500 cr in Pending Bills

Collection jumps 39% as dept ramps up bid to fatten the tax kitty

Anuradha.Shukla@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: The income tax department has recovered ₹73,500 crore of pending dues in this financial year up to March 15, on the back of a targeted recovery plan drawn up as part of efforts to step up collection of outstanding tax arrears, officials said.

Of the total, pending corporate tax dues amount to ₹56,000 crore, ₹16,500 crore is personal income tax and ₹50 crore is undisclosed income from foreign assets, said a senior official.

"We have recovered about ₹73,500 crore and the number may go up further," the official told ET on condition of anonymity. The department had collected over ₹52,000 crore in FY23.

The official said while it was difficult to give year-wise details of outstanding dues, the collection averaged 8% of annual outstanding till 2021-22, which went up to 10.78% in 2022-23 and is about 17% in this fiscal so far. Pending tax arrears, which had crossed ₹21.94 lakh crore in January 31, 2023, from ₹15 lakh crore in April 2021, have been a key area of concern for the tax department.

The department had drawn up a roadmap to help it recover outstanding dues more efficiently, including identification of cases where recovery was possible, use of technology to track untraceable defaulters and handing out zone-wise tar-



gets to field formations. "This year the recovery is much better and in the last two-and-a-half months only we have recovered ₹37,000 crore," said the official cited earlier. In some cases, arrears date to assessment years 2003-04

and 2004-05, for which the department tracked defaulters through the use of technology. In some cases, though taxes had been paid, they were not reflecting in their system and effort was on to update the database, the official said.

FOR INDIA, THAT IS BHARAT



# Big Poll Spends unlikely to Lift Rural Demand

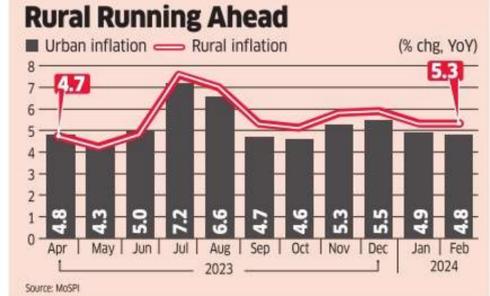
Rural economy will need more support measures and capex push, say economists

Ishaan Gera & Sharmistha Mukherjee

New Delhi: Rural consumption will require further support measures from the new government as well as a sustained capital expenditure push to get broad-based in the next few quarters, economists said, indicating that the upcoming general election is unlikely to provide a significant lift.

In the passenger car and two-wheeler segments, which have seen an upswing in demand in recent months, industry executives said it is broader economic growth rather than elections which will give further impetus to sales. "After the election, if the government does announce some measures to correct demand, perhaps consumption demand will also pick up. Easing inflation pressures is also expected to give some leg-up to real wages," said Paras Jasrai, senior analyst, India Ratings and Research.

India will hold the general election in seven phases between April and June. A spending of about ₹1 lakh crore is expected. In 2023, the government exten-



ded the free food grain scheme for five years and recently provided further relief in LPG prices.

Jasrai said more can be done by rationalising GST rates and increasing allocations to PM-Kisan minimum income support scheme for farmers and rural schemes, including wages under the MGNREGA.

"A sustained focus on capex will indirectly support demand," said Rajani Sinha, chief economist at CareEdge.

Economists said a normal monsoon and lower rural inflation will also be pivotal to recovery getting broad-based. "In FY25, we expect rural demand to be supported by better monsoon,"

said Gaura Sengupta, economist, IDFC First Bank.

If the normal monsoon conditions persist, the government may not have to do much, according to economists. "Rural-led demand recovery will gradually build up going into the next fiscal year," said Yuvika Singhal, economist, QuantEco Research.

Data released last week showed a contraction in non-durable production in January. Sinha said this was, in some ways, reflective of the economy's lack of broad consumption demand.

Automakers also do not expect a huge boost in sales during elections. "Sales data in the last 25 years shows no real correlation with election year phenomena," said Shashank Srivastava, senior executive officer (marketing and sales), Maruti Suzuki.

# 'Women Entrepreneurs Key Govt Focus'

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Women entrepreneurs, sustainability and village industries are the focus areas of government as it seeks to make MSMEs competitive and encourage them to adopt a circular economy model, according to Mercy

Epaio, joint secretary, micro, small and medium enterprises ministry. The government also recognises the importance of green technology, and the ministry has taken steps such as setting up the Export Acceleration and Experience Centre (EAEC) and the Centre of Excellence for MSME Enablement of Technology (CO-

MET) in Hyderabad to help MSMEs shift towards greener technology. "We are helping MSMEs by making them competent so that they can enter the global value chain. COMET has been established in partnership with IIT-Hyderabad, which will help MSMEs adopt green technology," said Epaio.

# Nod to Urea Imports for a Yr

New Delhi: The government Monday allowed the import of urea through India Potash Ltd (IPL), Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilizers Ltd (RCF), and National Fertilizers Ltd (NFL) for another year — until March 31, 2025.

The Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) in a notification said that import of urea (for agriculture purpose) on government account shall be allowed either by designated state trading enterprises (STEs) itself, or other entities authorised by the government's fertilizers department.

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पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल, कोडरमा

**शुद्धि पत्र**

एतद द्वारा सूचित किया जाता है कि पथ प्रमंडल, कोडरमा द्वारा समचार पत्रों में प्रकाशित की गई E-Tender Ref No-RCD/KODERMA/288/2024 दिनांक -12/03/2024, PR No-322489 Road(23-24), D को निम्न प्रकार से संशोधित किया जाता है।

क्र.सं.	कार्य का नाम	शुद्धि तिथि
1	कार्य का नाम	
2	वेबसाइट पर निविदा प्रकाशन की तिथि।	18.03.2024, 10:30 बजे से।
3	बिड प्रक्रिया की अंतिम तिथि	23.03.2024, 12:00 बजे तक।
4	बिड खुलने की तिथि	27.03.2024, 12:30 बजे तक।

शेष शर्तें यथावत रहेंगी।

कार्यपालक अभियंता  
पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल, कोडरमा

PR 323077 Road(23-24), D

**कार्यपालक अभियंता का कार्यालय,**  
पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल,  
सरायकेला-खरसावों

**"स्थगन सूचना"**

पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल, सरायकेला-खरसावों द्वारा आमंत्रित Tender Reference No. RCD/SERAIKELLA/27 दिनांक 11.03.2024 तथा पी०आर० संख्या-PR 322483 Road 23-24#D द्वारा प्रकाशित निविदा को अपरिहार्य कारणों से स्थगित किया जाता है।

कार्यपालक अभियंता,  
पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल,  
सरायकेला-खरसावों

PR 323083 Road(23-24)#D

**कार्यपालक अभियंता का कार्यालय,**  
पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल,  
सरायकेला-खरसावों

**"स्थगन सूचना"**

पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल, सरायकेला-खरसावों द्वारा आमंत्रित Tender Reference No. RCD/SERAIKELLA/33 दिनांक 13.03.2024 तथा पी०आर० संख्या-PR 322766 Road (23-24)\_D द्वारा प्रकाशित निविदा को अपरिहार्य कारणों से स्थगित किया जाता है।

कार्यपालक अभियंता,  
पथ निर्माण विभाग, पथ प्रमंडल,  
सरायकेला-खरसावों

PR 323084 (Road)23-24\*D

**U.P. Power Corporation Limited**  
Power Management Cell, Gomti Nagar, Lucknow-226010 e-mail: cepmc@upcl.org/cepmcupcl@gmail.com

**PROCUREMENT OF POWER ON SHORT-TERM BASIS THROUGH TARIFF-BASED COMPETITIVE BIDDING PROCESS Tender Specification No. 28/DEEP/PMC/SUMMER 2024** Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation Limited (UPPCL), intends to buy Firm Power, for the month of 16-April-2024 to September-2024 under Short Term basis. Trading licensees/ Generators/ State utilities/ C/PPS/ Distribution licensees/SEBs, across the country may offer power, from one or more than one source subject to condition that offers from each source shall not be less than 25 MW, as per the details given below:-

Month, Time Block (hrs.), Quantum (MW), 16-04-2024 to 30-04-2024, 00:00-03:00, 500, 19:00-24:00, 1400, 01-05-2024 to 31-05-2024, 00:00-03:00, 1100, 19:00-24:00, 1850, 01-06-2024 to 30-06-2024, 00:00-05:00, 1500, 19:00-24:00, 2500, 01-07-2024 to 31-07-2024, 20:00-23:00, 700, 01-08-2024 to 31-08-2024, 19:00-23:00, 800, 01-09-2024 to 30-09-2024, 19:00-24:00, 1200.

Submission of EMD BP - 02.04.2024 (16:00), Opening of RFP (Non financial Bid) - 03.04.2024 (12:00), Submission of RFP-Bid (Non financial Bid & IPOs) - 02.04.2024 (16:00), Opening of IPO/ Start of e-RFP - 03.04.2024 (14:00) / 03.04.2024 (17:00), Request for Proposal 'Activation of Event shall take place on 19.03.2024. The link for e-bidding portal and detail terms and condition of the tender is available at [www.mstcecommerce.com](http://www.mstcecommerce.com) and is also available on the website of Ministry of Power ([www.powermin.nic.in](http://www.powermin.nic.in)) and PFC Consulting Limited ([www.pfcindia.com](http://www.pfcindia.com)). Bidders are requested to familiarize the above said revised guideline carefully before submitting the offer.

CHEF ENGINEER (PMC) UPPCL  
'Save Electricity for the Nation. RO No. 16, dated 18.03.2024.

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# Opinion

TUESDAY, MARCH 19, 2024



**ON GENDER PAY PARITY**  
UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres

Worldwide, women earn just 51 cents for every dollar earned by a man. Governments have a responsibility to invest in ending poverty & achieving sustainable development for all. That takes budgets & taxes that address the specific needs of women living in poverty

## Light-touch regulation

Instead of an ex-ante regulatory framework, the Digital Competition Bill should focus on broad-based guidelines

**NEED AND TIMING** are the two prerequisites for putting in place any kind of regulatory framework. With rapid advancement in digitalisation, which has seen the emergence of big tech firms like Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple, domestic startups feel constrained in growing beyond a point and frequently raise the point of bringing some form of regulation to check their predatory behaviour and create a level playing field. So, from the need and timing point of view, an initiative was certainly required. The Parliamentary Standing Committee in its report in December 2022 identified 10 predominant anti-competitive practices by large digital enterprises and examined the need for strengthening the competition framework to address such practices. This became the starting point for the ministry of corporate affairs to constitute a committee to examine the need for a Digital Competition Act, which puts in place an *ex-ante* regulatory framework to prevent such anti-competitive conducts from occurring.

The current *ex-post* approach, where intervention takes place after the practices come to the fore, was seen to be not a sufficient remedy in fast-paced digital markets. The context and argument cannot be faulted and the committee's report is certainly strong theoretically. However, it seems to have bitten off more than it can chew from a practical standpoint. The report clearly highlights the fact that there's no strict dividing line between global big tech firms and major domestic digital platforms. The lines are blurred, which the industry submissions to the committee clearly bring out. If some domestic firms see Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple acting as a bully, there are several other homegrown enterprises who see Zomato, Swiggy, and Oyo in similar light. It's no surprise then that both sets of companies are against *ex-ante* regulations on the ground that it would kill innovation, leading to slowdown in investments.

The committee does have a point that *ex-post* investigation is time consuming whereas *ex-ante* being preventive in nature checks potential harm to a section of players in a timely manner. However, there's no easy answer whether the *ex-ante* nature of regulations has the potential to nip the problem in the bud or will lead to long legal battles. If one goes by the Competition Commission of India's October 2022 order on Google's anti-competitive practices in the Android space, the matter is far from being resolved till date. Further, regulation works fine in a cohesive sector where the boundaries can be strictly defined. In the digital space, the nature of businesses varies, with the only common thing being that all of them are providers of core digital services and have the ability to influence the digital market. However, the ability of a search engine platform to influence markets and a food aggregator platform varies vastly in nature and the intra-industry fights could be over a wide range of issues, which may be beyond the scope of *ex-ante* regulations.

The committee perhaps recognises this and has, therefore, talked about provisions of granting exemptions as well as intervening in areas which cannot be foreseen today. Rather than putting an elaborate omnibus mechanism of levying penalties and strictures, the committee should stick to areas dominated by Google and Apple, who have the potential to cause larger harm because of the ecosystem they control. There is a requirement to lay down some broad-based guidelines, which if violated, would trigger regulatory intervention. A light-touch regulation is a much better option.

## After Credit Suisse, Switzerland still has issues

**THE COLLAPSE OF** Credit Suisse Group AG was a shock, but it shouldn't have been much of a surprise. Years of bad strategy and poor management decisions under a carousel of changing executives bred a cockroach nest of scandals and losses.

The big question is how the Swiss bank was allowed to slowly destroy itself. Why didn't regulators or shareholders do more to alter its course? For the regulators, at least, the answer that has emerged in the year since its failure is that they lacked the tools. Beefing up the powers of Finma, the main financial watchdog, is the most pressing issue for Switzerland to protect the country and its financial industry.

UBS's rescue of its longtime rival has created a bank that overshadows its home economy more than any other. UBS's enlarged balance sheet is worth \$1.695 trillion in terms of leverage exposure – an internationally comparable measure. That is more than double Switzerland's 2023 gross domestic product. HSBC Holdings Plc's balance sheet on this measure is worth 83% of UK GDP, while BNP Paribas SA is equivalent to 72% of France's. The world's biggest bank, JPMorgan Chase & Co, is just 17% of US GDP.

UBS's sheer scale would be an unbearable burden for Switzerland if it ever got into real distress. It's not just UBS, there are three domestic systemically important banks in Switzerland whose sizes range between 15% and 37% of its GDP, according to the Financial Stability Board, an international group of regulators.

Without doubt, Credit Suisse's collapse was the fault of executives and board.

Its investment bank used far too much capital for far too little return and dragged down the whole group's profits. "Over time, it lost the discipline of risk [versus] return," as Sergio Ermotti, chief executive officer of UBS, told the head of the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund, Nicolai Tangen, in a recent interview.

Ermotti's critique could be seen as self-serving: It helps to justify UBS's takeover and its reasons for cutting staff and clients. But Credit Suisse's rap sheet was long. Since 2012, Finma conducted 43 investigations, issued nine reprimands, filed 16 criminal charges and finished 14 enforcement actions against the bank or employees. Eleven of those actions came in 2018 or later. Swiss regulators also generally can't name and shame banks or individuals for wrongdoing. Punitive tools like fines and publicity play an important role in making sure that disciplinary action sticks. A quiet dressing down that stays inside the regulator's office is never going to have the same influence on a bank's behaviour.

Another great weakness is that Finma can't try to avert a crisis by imposing restrictions when it sees a bank deteriorating. It can only intervene when a bank really is on the brink of failure. With Credit Suisse, Finma was aware of the scandals, stock price collapse, unsustainable business model and increasingly frequent executive changes, but couldn't change its direction when the management refused to face the truth. "During the bank's final months, its management proved recalcitrant and insisted on an interpretation of the bank's future prospects that was at odds with that of the supervisor," according to the experts report released last September.

One other problem at Credit Suisse that is relevant beyond Switzerland has to do with its loss of liquidity as depositors fled. Even at the end, the bank had good collateral available that could have been used to raise funding. Much of it was within the Swiss bank and legal restrictions stopped it from being passed up to the group holding company to raise funding for overseas units. That's why the extra unsecured emergency liquidity facility had to be created to lend the bank cash without collateral.

Right now, the US, UK and Europe are all reaffirming the need for banks in their regions to make sure they are prepared to use liquidity facilities should they be needed as they worry about the speed of bank runs in the modern world. A big part of that is ensuring that banks have collateral that is ready to be used wherever a loss of funding occurs.

Credit Suisse marched itself into disaster. Switzerland needs to guarantee that in future its regulator can do more than stand by and watch.

**THE PRIME MINISTER** as well as the finance minister has assured the nation on many occasions that the "phone banking" era between 2004 and 2014—an euphemism for political interference in banking decisions—has been buried by this government. They must have walked the talk, so it can be assumed that no phone call would have gone to the State Bank of India (SBI), instructing it to procrastinate on submitting information on electoral bonds as asked for by the Supreme Court of India (SC).

What then explains the "Banker to every Indian" playing hide and seek with the apex court, forcing the latter to issue a third direction to the bank regarding the uncovering of data in the electoral bonds case? It's an uncomfortable question, but the country's largest bank must answer it to remove the cloud of confusion over its approach on the issue. After all, SBI's website takes credit for delivering "cutting-edge digital services to millions of customers."

In this case, it didn't even require any cutting-edge technology prowess. It only needed pure common sense and the ability to collate the information already available digitally with the bank. It wasn't such a mammoth exercise anyway—as per the details provided by the bank itself, 22,217 electoral bonds were issued. As each bond would have two sets of information—donors and receivers—this would imply a total of 44,434 information sets.

A bank with 2,35,000 employees could have surely deployed a few additional hands to make sure that the work to collate the information sets was completed within the court's original deadline. Instead, in its affidavit to the SC asking for three more months—the

## POWER POINT

SBI'S DEMURRAL ON ELECTORAL BONDS HAS DENTED ITS CREDIBILITY

# Playing hide and seek

**SHYAMAL MAJUMDAR**

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Lok Sabha elections would be over by then—the bank sought refuge in the excuse of "practical difficulties with the decoding exercise." It was a laughable excuse, that too just two days before the expiry of the deadline, and didn't take SC much time in dismissing the plea.

It's inconceivable that the SBI brass couldn't read the writing on the wall and chose to follow the court's order in letter and notably not in spirit: it let people know as little as possible. While submitting the details of donor names, amounts and dates in one file and the names of the receiving parties and the total amounts they received in another, SBI made sure that there was no bridge between the two. That's because the bank didn't furnish the unique numbers attached to the bonds, without which the link between the donor and the political party that encashed the bond would remain invisible. The court has now called SBI's bluff.

In any case, the SC's order was straightforward. The bank was asked to compile details it was always required to keep and give these to the Election Commission by March 6. But in its application, SBI asked for more time to carry out

value addition on the data. But SC's order didn't ask for it—it just asked the bank to hand over information it was anyway expected to maintain. No one knows why the bank wanted to be more loyal than the king by wanting more time to match donor details with redemption by political parties.

It's now crystal clear that SBI didn't divulge the unique number, often referred to as the "matching code", as it could have almost immediately established a connection between the purchaser of the bond and the beneficiary political party. The decision is particularly surprising as these unique numbers are recorded and SBI conducts an audit trail every financial year. What was the big deal then in compiling and matching the data of the purchaser and the political parties?

One marvels at SBI's perseverance in trying to put as many roadblocks as possible in making sure that the information is delayed. Consider this: while arguing for an extension of time, the SBI counsel had submitted that in order to keep the details of electoral bonds purchased secure, they were maintained in physical form, and not digitally. Also, he argued, the name of the purchaser and

**A trove of documents, which transparency activist Commodore Lokesh Batra had shared with *The Collective*, show SBI was much more nimble-footed when it was asked by the central government to provide data on electoral bonds**

## From disparity to parity



**SHAILJA MEHTA**

Director, Dasra

India's private healthcare sector has a glaring blind spot. Despite a strong presence overall, women hold a mere 18% of leadership positions. This isn't just an equity issue; it hinders the sector's full potential

**IN THE EVER-**evolving landscape of leadership, the challenge of gender disparity presents a significant hurdle. Despite being known for its dynamic growth and substantial employment opportunities, India's private healthcare sector faces a noticeable underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. Though it employs over half of the total healthcare workforce, women's presence in leadership positions is disproportionately low. In the more specialised fields of pharmaceuticals and biotech, female leadership is even scarcer, with representation barely touching the 5-10% range. This gender gap transcends mere equity concerns, carrying profound economic implications for the nation, given the sector's status as one of the top five largest employers with over 4.7 million direct employees.

An *Unbalanced Scale*, a report released by Dasra, highlights this disparity. Despite dominating lower-level positions, women hold only 18% of leadership roles in the private healthcare sector and earn 34% less than their male counterparts. This stark gender imbalance not only restricts women's influence within their organisations but also poses a significant threat to the overall growth and profitability of these institutions. With a projected Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 11-13%, the sector anticipates growth driven by increased healthcare expenditure and a rising demand for generic drugs. However, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles stands as a significant hurdle to unlocking the sector's full growth potential. Global

research attests that firms with more women in executive leadership positions are 21% more likely to outperform the average. Neglecting this issue could result in missed opportunities for women, hinder overall sector growth, and perpetuate economic disparities.

Solving this leadership gender gap requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach, as highlighted in The Udaiti Foundation's *Pathways to Progress* report. At the individual level, empowering initiatives such as mentorship programs and leadership skilling can equip women to ascend the organisational ladder with confidence. Tied to this is the implementation of diversity targets—organisations must proactively implement representation targets across all levels, signalling a desire for progress from the top. Fostering a culture of inclusivity, with equitable allocation of financial and employee resources to rising leaders in middle management, regardless of their gender, is also vital.

Addressing the limited pipeline of women employees, in pharmaceutical firms particularly, is required, where just 8-12% of all employees are women. To counter this, adopting successful strategies in other sectors like banking and financial services could be beneficial. Especially, return-to-work programs that could facilitate the seamless reintegration of women into the workforce

after career breaks, potentially transforming the private healthcare sector's landscape. At the public policy level, it is essential to move beyond the tokenistic mandate of having at least one woman per board towards fostering more substantial support for the development of women employees into leadership roles. Government-led incentives can play a pivotal role, drawing inspiration from successful initiatives like Japan's 'Nadeshiko Brands', which highlight companies with equitable gender policies and representation as appealing investment opportunities with promising long-term growth prospects.

Additionally, intentional public commitments by industry bodies such as recognising and rewarding existing women leaders, extending capacity building grants for women in mid-management, committing to host gender balanced conference panels among others, will foster a culture of inclusivity and advance gender diversity initiatives. The recent announcement at the world economic forum of the 'Alliance for Global Good—Gender Equity and Equality' is a welcome step in this direction.

The strategies discussed for addressing the issue of women's leadership in the private health sector rely on a robust conceptual framework that distinguishes between transactional and transformational leadership, as well as between lead-

ership qualities that are ascribed or intrinsic. This framework provides a dual focus: it not only increases the representation of women in leadership roles, but also enhances the effectiveness of women employees in the sector. When integrated with the traditional socio-ecological model, which examines the intricate dynamics between the individual, interpersonal relationships, community or organisational structures, and societal or public policy, it provides a comprehensive approach to program design, especially in initiatives aimed at organisational and systemic change. Through this lens, several key levers emerge that can accelerate women's advancement in leadership within the health sector, including individual leadership development, fostering supportive workplace cultures, providing institutional support, and promoting sector-wide commitment and action.

As such, shifting the needle on women's representation, choice, and voice in leadership requires top-level support, policy mandates, the cultivation of male allies, and gender-transformative organisational change approaches. Addressing these challenges is essential for unlocking the full potential of women, ensuring sectoral growth, and promoting inclusive economic development. As India sets its sights on Mission 2047, fostering an environment that embraces women's leadership is not just a matter of equity. It is a strategic imperative for the future of the sector and the nation. Breaking these barriers is not only a societal obligation but a pathway to a more prosperous and inclusive healthcare landscape.

Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Mammoth democratic exercise

As per the schedule of general elections announced by ECI on Saturday, it will be a 44 days process spread over 7 phases, kick-starting the world's largest democratic exercise to finish the whole process in run up to constitute the 18th Lok Sabha. This is undoubtedly the largest human management project in the world with 968 million eligible voters,

which is more than the combined populations of the entire EU or North America and voters here speak dozens of languages and live in some of the world's most chaotic urban spaces and some of its most isolated villages and tough terrains. Given the circumstances, the ECI has a difficult job in ensuring that the poll process is not only fair but also seen as such. This challenge has been complicated by the abrupt exit of an ECI member, and two hurried appointments. The ECI

must know that all eyes are on it when it comes to assessing the biggest democratic exercise on the planet. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

### Farming in India

Apropos of 'Making farming profitable', the belief that Punjab and Haryana were the main agricultural pillars of India was debunked by the stats in the article. It would take some convincing to make farmers shift from the traditional cropping patterns to

more profitable ventures. Once the farmers realise there is more money to be made in other crops, they would automatically shift to them. A few hundred farmers willing to take the first step must be nurtured with expert advice. Once acreage of rice and wheat is reduced, their prices too will get remunerative; thus creating a cycle of prosperity. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra



## OPINION

The  
**Hindustan Times**  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

## Zero tolerance for mob violence

Communal targeting of foreign students in Gujarat University should not go unpunished

The mob attack on foreign students at Gujarat University, Ahmedabad is appalling and should serve as a wake-up call. The state police have been quick to act and arrest some of the perpetrators. The external affairs ministry has stepped in to control potential damage to India's international image. Though the university authorities have said this is the first time such an incident has taken place on the campus, the local administration needs to investigate the attackers and send out a tough message that there will be zero tolerance for mob violence.

The mob entered the campus, which houses 300 foreign students, and targeted them in a block that housed students from countries including Sri Lanka, South Africa, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. They were upset that Ramzan prayers were being offered in the hostel premises instead of a mosque and attacked the students and ransacked their rooms. Two of the victims were hospitalised. The peculiar response of the vice-chancellor of the university is that the foreign students will be sensitised to respect the local culture. Sure, but a more urgent step is to sensitise the locals to the axiom Indians take pride in — *atithi devo bhava* (guest is God). It is the university's responsibility to make the students secure and have zero tolerance for intruders. If students violate any campus rule, it is for the university authorities to reprimand them. In this case, it should have made arrangements for Muslim students to offer *namaz* and observe *roza*. Indian secularism, after all, does not exclude any faith: It abides by the principle of *sarva dharmasama bhava* (equal respect for all faiths) and is comfortable with public displays of faith.

Coming in the wake of the notification of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which is perceived in many quarters as unfriendly to Muslims, violence of the sort witnessed in Gujarat University can do immense harm to India's reputation. Indian universities have been welcoming hosts to students from its extended neighbourhood and Africa for decades. It has been a part of Delhi's soft power outreach and an affirmation of its solidarity with the Global South. At a time when India seeks to be a leader and friend of the world, a *vishwa guru* and *vishwa mitra*, hooliganism under the excuse of serving faith can be disastrous. The Ahmedabad incident should not be seen in isolation: Other campuses too have witnessed similar violence — the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda has been a target of Hindutva vigilantism for years — and everything is happening against the backdrop of a political climate that seems to be tolerant of hate speech.

## A popular twist to women's cricket

The first big fillip to women's cricket in India came in 2023, when the scale of the winning bids for players at the Women's Premier League (WPL) auction outstripped not just other women's leagues but also any other Indian leagues across sports. Before the 2024 season began, it was clear that the next big leap would require cricket to be of a quality that drew audiences to the grounds and screens. On that front, it was a big success. The final, which saw Royal Challengers Bangalore (RCB) win their first title as a franchise (and that includes their much-vaunted Indian Premier League team); perhaps there are lessons to be learnt there as well), was attended by over 29,000 fans in Delhi on Sunday. That's a healthy number for any match anywhere in the world. The viewership numbers for the final are not in, but last year, WPL is believed to have delivered the highest viewership for any women's event (in the world).

The success of WPL means much for the sport itself in India — IPL created opportunities for young people from around the country to showcase their skills and played a significant part in making India a powerhouse of cricket (the men's team is the top-ranked across formats currently), and the women's version can be expected to do the same. As IPL's example shows, when such leagues work, they achieve two more things: One, they attract more money to the sport, bettering both infrastructure and the prospects of individual players; and two, they create a global ecosystem of scouts, coaches, physical trainers, medical support staff, and brand managers that only serves to make the sport bigger. We can't wait for 2025.

# Right to dissent is the lifeline of democracy

A recent Supreme Court order underscores why free speech matters for empowerment of the individual and the health of democratic societies

Human dignity entails certain fundamental, inalienable rights that are designated by a legal regime rather than being granted by a constitution or a law. Freedom of speech and expression, as guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, has been recognised as a cornerstone right, which is essential to the realisation of individual liberty and the advancement of democracy. The recent ruling by the Supreme Court (SC) to throw out a criminal case against a Kashmiri professor employed by a college in Kolhapur, Maharashtra for writing in a private WhatsApp group that the repeal of Article 370 was a "black day" and wishing Pakistan a "Happy Independence Day" is a powerful reminder of this fundamental tenet of democracy.

Authorised by justice Abhay S Oka, the judgment was emphatic that if every criticism or protest of the actions of the State is to be held as an offence under Section 153A, "democracy, which is an essential feature of the Constitution of India, will not survive". Section 153A deals with the offence of promoting disharmony, enmity or feelings of hatred between

different groups on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, and language, and doing acts prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony. The offence is punishable with a jail term of up to three years.

In a strong restatement of the first principles of democracy, the SC ruled that the right to dissent in a legitimate and lawful manner is an integral part of the rights guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a). "Every individual must respect the right of others to dissent. An opportunity to peacefully protest the decisions of the Government is an essential part of democracy," highlighted the Court.

The verdict reinforces the value of free speech, underlining that its significance lies not only in the freedom to express oneself but also in its role in advancing personal dignity and safeguarding democratic principles. It presents a nuanced approach to why free speech is essential for both individual empowerment and the health of democratic societies.

The foundation of free speech allows people to share their ideas, opinions, and life experiences without worrying about reprisal. This independence encourages self-expression and personal development by enabling people to speak up for who they are and defy social standards. Through free speech, marginalised voices can be heard, and diverse perspectives can enrich public discourse.

The March 7 judgment aligns per-

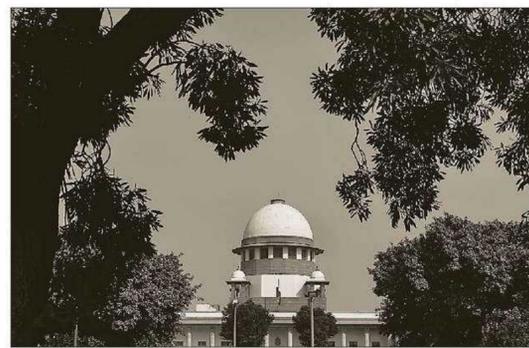
fectly with an array of ground-breaking precedents, including *Hamdard Dawakhana Vs Union of India* (1959), *Bennett Coleman and Co Vs Union of India* (1973), *S Rangarajan Vs P Jagjivan Ram* (1989), *People's Union for Civil Liberties Vs Union of India* (1997), *Shreya Singhal Vs Union of India* (2015), *Navtej Singh Johar Vs Union of India* (2018) and *Anuradha Bhasin Vs Union of India* (2020). These judgments render a testament to the SC's commitment to upholding freedom of speech and expression through its interpretative, adjudicative and balancing functions.

Besides being the bedrock upon which individuals can assert their identities and challenge societal norms, free speech also serves as a check on power by enabling citizens to hold their governments and institutions accountable. When individuals are free to criticise authority and expose wrongdoing, it helps prevent abuses of power and corruption. The foundations of democracy are accountability and transparency, and free speech guarantees that individuals in positions of power are subject to scrutiny.

Likewise, one of the most crucial functions of the courts is to scrutinise laws and government actions to ensure they do not infringe on the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. This judicial review is significant in preventing the erosion of free speech through legislative or executive overreach, which often entails criminal prosecution — like the one



Utkarsh Anand



The recent judgment by the Supreme Court affirms that a robust judiciary is indispensable for the protection of democratic values

the Kashmiri professor faced. In *Romesh Thappar Vs State of Madras* (1950), the SC stated that freedom of speech lay at the foundation of all democratic organisations. In *Sakal Papers (P) Ltd and Others Vs Union of India* (1962), a Constitution bench held that freedom of speech and expression of opinion is of paramount importance under a democratic constitution which envisages changes in the composition of legislatures and governments and must be preserved. In *Bennett Coleman*, the apex court called freedom of speech and of the press "the Ark of the Covenant of Democracy because public criticism is essential to the working of its institutions".

Through nuanced judgments, the judiciary has helped define the boundaries of free speech in a manner that respects both individual freedoms and the collective well-being of society. It has remained emphatic that the right to free speech, dissent or protest must fall within the parameters of what is acceptable in a democratic setting and cannot lead to incitement to violence. On the ambit of restrictions that the State can impose on free speech under Article 19(2), the top court in *Ramesh Vs*

*Union of India* (1988) held that words used in the alleged criminal speech "should be judged from the standards of reasonable, strong-minded, firm and courageous men, and not those of weak and vacillating minds, nor of those who scent danger in every hostile point of view". In *S Rangarajan Vs P Jagjivan Ram* (1989), the Court emphasised that "freedom of expression cannot be held to ransom, by an intolerant group of people". Former SC judge Krishna Iyer once said that "this freedom is essential because the censorial power lies in the people over and against the Government, and not in the Government over and against the people".

The recent judgment by the SC affirms that a robust judiciary is indispensable for the protection of democratic values and the maintenance of a vibrant public sphere, which, in turn, are integral to the health and functioning of a democracy and promoting a culture of open and tolerant discourse. This judicial stance reinforces the idea that democratic societies must accommodate a broad spectrum of views, even those that are unpopular or controversial.

The views expressed are personal

## Admiral who defended nation and Constitution

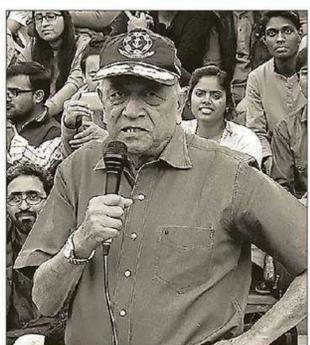
Admiral Laxminarayan Ramdas or Ramu as everyone affectionately called him, was more than a decorated Chief of the Indian Navy. He became a known figure in the Indian civil space of social and peace movements. Ramu understood the civil space and its importance in a democratic society, and upon retirement shifted his attention and time here.

Undoubtedly, Ramu was influenced by the four ladies in his life — his wife Lalita and three daughters, all of whom reflected his own ideals of tolerance, women's rights, and the understanding of the links between security, development and peace. It is no wonder that it was during his tenure that women were inducted into the Indian armed forces with the Navy taking the lead. He showed the way to gender equality in his professional life and daily practice.

It was then, after his distinguished service in the Indian Navy, that this part of his life came to the fore. Of course, it was natural that many institutions asked him to be a member of their boards. So he was on the governing body of Springdales School, among several others, always supporting ideals for education, supporting that the economically weaker sections be given space in public schools, where Springdales showed an exemplary lead. This is when social movements beckoned him. Lalita, my friend, had been engaged in social movements since long by then. This seemed to be Ramu's natural space.

Then there was the critical juncture when India decided to go openly nuclear. This was a moment of deep anguish and personal dilemma for the admiral. Having spent a life in defence with a mindset steeped in arms and a belief in the necessity of deterrence, Ramu, now an activist associated with social movements, faced a personal security dilemma. On the one hand, there was concern that the ultimate weapon of indiscriminate, mass and irreversible destruction be inducted into Indian defence but on the other hand, was the moral compass calling from the land of Gandhi, non-violence and peace, with the aim of ridding itself of poverty and facing the challenges of development.

Ramu made a choice to support the path of peace and crossed the line into social activism. He supported and often led Indian and global movements for nuclear disarmament



Admiral Ramdas' leadership shone regardless of the arena he was in

and a nuclear-free world. He became part of the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace. He added his voice to the calls for peace in the subcontinent. He became part of the Indo-Pakistan Soldiers Initiative for Peace. His presence boosted the peace movement and he travelled far and wide for this cause.

But this was not all. The admiral was now part of many intersecting movements that centred around the vision that the development paradigm should be led by grassroots people's concerns. That the idea of growth benefits "trickling down" would be too slow. These movements were warning about neoliberal agendas of privatisation and globalisation. Ramu gave them a patient hearing. He went for any number of people's hearings, and public conversations on these issues where affected people spoke. He sided with the poorest, the excluded, and the marginalised.

Ramu was also involved in some people's struggles against the eviction of villagers in the Raigad region of Maharashtra. Here villagers were resisting their own eviction when their homeland was designated as a special economic zone. Ramu went there several times and appealed against this move, and that the villagers get a fair and good deal. Ramu similarly supported the struggles of the fisherfolk and their movement against deep sea trawlers. He engaged with climate activists, with women's pension schemes, and stood with farm workers and minorities of all types. He supported and was known to so many movements where the poorest people were struggling for their rights.

But that is not all. When the sweep of corruption faced the nation, Ramu briefly became the elder statesman for the fledgling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The AAP leadership had difficulties accepting the fair position that Ramu would take in a factional dispute in the party, which led to his expulsion as the internal Lokpal. Ramu then had enough of party politics and returned to his commitments in the social, developmental and peace arenas.

In all this Ramu never forgot the Indian soldier and the ranks of the Indian defence forces and was always there for them when they called and were in need. Even though he and Lolly (Lalita) lived on a distant farm in the village of Bhaimala, on land gifted to them by the Indian government for his valour and service to the nation, Ramu would travel back and forth and remained steadfast to the ideals of the oaths he took to serve the country and its Constitution.

Ramu made a difference wherever he was. His leadership shone regardless of the arena he was in. Whether at his home, on a far-off farm, where his humanity and kindness were felt by all around, or in the various social movements, Ramu's enlightened presence made that critical difference. Where would you find an admiral holding up those that development, defence spending and high Gross Domestic Product had passed by? It was indeed a privilege knowing Ramu.

So that's what Ramu was. His ideals, ideas and practice will remain in these forgotten fields where he stood firm on both tempestuous seas and on *terra firma*.

Anuradha Chenoy is an associate fellow of the Transnational Institute, The Netherlands.

The views expressed are personal

VLADIMIR PUTIN | RUSSIAN PRESIDENT

The source of power in Russia is its people and the voice of every citizen. Out of every voice, we are building one commonwealth of the people of the Russian Federation

In his victory speech, after winning a fifth term as Russian president



## Amended surrogacy law doesn't go the full distance

The amendment to the Surrogacy (Regulation) Rules, 2022, now allows donor gametes to be used by couples facing medical issues. A 2023 amendment had disallowed this. So, the latest amendment corrected what the courts too noted was an excessively strict criteria for surrogacy. While logical, the amendment still does not go far enough because even now at least one donor gamete has to be from the commissioning parents and a single woman still needs her own gametes. So couples or women with medical conditions cannot undertake surrogacy.

The amendment is the result of multiple petitions across the country. Courts have passed interim orders in multiple cases allowing women with Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser (MRKH) syndrome to use a surrogate, allowing import of the embryo of commissioning parents and gametes of an intending father into India as well as allowing parents who had lost a child to use surrogacy. Even allowing maternity leave to the commissioning mother was an issue decided by litigation. Similar orders have also been passed in the *Arun Muthuvel Vs Union of India* and related cases pending in the Supreme Court.

These cases question various aspects of the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021 (SRA) and its related Rules as well as the apparent contradictions between the SRA and the Assisted Reproductive Technology Act, 2021 (ART Act) and its related rules. According to the SRA, only a heterosexual married couple with no surviving children and widowed or divorced single women are currently eligible to commission surrogacy arrangements. Single men and women who are not widowed or divorced cannot enter into surrogacy arrangements.

The regulation of surrogacy and surrogacy clinics and also providing a legally sound set of safeguards for all parties, i.e. the commissioning parent/s, the surrogates and the children born of such arrangements was urgent. In the decade prior to the passing of the two Acts, the Volden (Netherlands), Jan Balaz (Germany) and Manji Yamada (Japan) and other cases highlighted the plight of parents and children separated from each other or having to undertake costly and time-consuming litigation to bring Indian-born children to the countries of their parents/grandparents. But India has to be careful not to make Indian

parents the ones having to litigate to allow for the completion of their family.

The ART and surrogacy cases highlight some important issues. The stricter legislation post-2019 has not led to better regulation of ART and surrogacy clinics. As of 2017, 80% of the IVF clinics were still unregistered and 98% of the ART clinics were not registered. The number of registered clinics falls far short of the total number of clinics in the country, and there seems to be no clinic which was rejected as per the national ART and surrogacy registry website.

The SRA does not recognise even live-in relationships despite such relationships having legal sanction in India since 2010. Within the narrow group of married heterosexual couples, at least one of the commissioning parents must be able to produce gametes. Same-sex couples and foreigners were prohibited from surrogacy in India in 2013 and 2016, respectively. The SRA did not change this position. At first, the SRA allowed only Indian citizens the right to enter into surrogacy arrangements, but an amendment now allows overseas Indian citizens this right too. The age limits for the couples currently set at between 23-50 years for the women and 26-55 years old for the men also seem to be need-

lessly restrictive. The complete ban on compensated surrogacy may also deserve a relook, as this means Indian couples are forced to travel abroad in case they do not meet the restrictive limits of the current legislation. It also seems arbitrary that all the actors involved in supporting surrogacy can be compensated, for example, doctors and lawyers, but the surrogate herself cannot. Thailand is also considering rolling back the complete ban on compensated surrogacy.

The requirement of board certifications and the method of record-keeping raises privacy concerns as well due to the involvement of various court and government agencies at different steps in the process. Thus, while the Acts are meant to protect women, the restrictions on women and their freedom to choose these procedures restrict the very same rights to autonomy the Acts seek to protect (marital status, age and the ability to use her womb as she wishes with informed consent).

Lavanya Regunathan Fischer is a lawyer. The views expressed are personal



## OUR VIEW



## Clean charging should herald India's EV drive

Our policies aim to enable the proliferation of electric vehicles, as they should, but we also need innovative plans to ensure that we rely mostly on clean energy sources to charge them

India's new electric vehicle (EV) import policy will turn the local EV market more vibrant at the upper end, no doubt, especially if Tesla were to make its domestic debut, but we also need to work on a plan to ensure EVs use clean power to charge their batteries. This aspect, however, seems to be getting much less attention than is due. Our current policy focus appears set on getting EV adoption to accelerate. Sure, electrifying vehicles does keep the noxious fumes of fossil-fuel combustion off the streets, but it is also energy intensive. Since much of India's grid-linked generation of electricity is done by burning coal to boil water and steam-drive turbines, the broader goal of our green transition would be lost if an EV boom results in vehicular power consumption outpacing our ramp-up of renewable capacity, as that would add up to even greater carbon emissions overall. Getting car buyers to go electric is just one part of the endeavour.

Under the government's latest EV policy revision, foreign auto-makers can import up to 8,000 EVs valued above \$35,000 apiece annually for five years at a sharply lowered 15% tariff for sale in the country, provided they commit to investing \$500 million in setting up a manufacturing base here and raising localization levels to 50% by the end of that period. The attempt is to grant global EV makers such as Tesla a quick pathway into our market without upsetting a long-established auto-sector policy that insists on cars either being made locally or paying steep duties for market access. While a conditional easing of import duty may not be exactly what Tesla was seeking, it seems good enough to attract a swift test launch even as it goes about prospect-scouting in the country.

Given the high profile of Elon Musk's EV marque, its entry would also act as a signal to the world of India being a hot 'China plus one' choice for rolling products off assembly lines. If high-end EVs start being made in India, it would be a win for the country's image as a manufacturing hub. The creation of supply chains could spark action across price slabs and add frisson to our EV market on the whole. How globally competitive these vehicles turn out will depend on how the idea shapes up. So far, car-making in India has had high tariff protection, rendering local products overpriced. The duty drop marks a chance for a break.

India must not lose sight of the charging challenge, though. While our renewable scale-up may look good on paper, clean power sources still feed our grid too weakly for comfort, with the risk that EV proliferation may worsen rather than relieve climate change. Opting for a huge bump-up in nuclear power would be fraught with other complexities. A safer solution might be to set up vast car parks equipped with solar panels to charge EVs during the day that could be used as power storage devices to run other appliances once driven home and plugged in at night. Much depends on advances in power-pack and solar cell technology. Vehicles with rooftop panels, for example, could work if solar capture gets better. Whatever approach is taken, much top-level policy planning would have to go into it. The key is to coordinate every aspect of the energy transition that we aim to make on our way to carbon neutrality. India's target of 2070 may seem distant, but early-stage commitments matter hugely. As the buzz around EVs grows, let's ensure we don't end up shifting emissions from our streets to power plants.

M. MUNEEER



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Growing income disparity in an economy like India, with over 800 million people deemed in need of free food from the government, does not augur well for its developmental ambitions. India's top 1% own 40% of its total wealth, by one estimate, while the bottom half own just 3%. A recent UN report said the poor in India are unable to afford even basic necessities. Meanwhile, the wealth of the richest individuals has risen sharply in recent years.

Uncontrolled capitalism is failing the world's largest democracy, just as socialism did. And just as the Land Ceiling Act of the 1970s was implemented to limit the size of landholdings and redistribute land, could a wealth ceiling law help reduce this gap?

This is a complex proposition with potential benefits and challenges. An income or wealth ceiling would set a maximum limit on the income or wealth of an individual or household, aiming to narrow the gap by redistributing wealth. But its efficacy and feasibility warrant careful consideration.

An income cap could possibly curb excessive wealth accumulation among the ultra-rich and address extreme income disparity. By capping income at the top end and redistributing the excess funds through taxation or other mechanisms, the government could fund social welfare programmes, education, healthcare, etc. Further, a 2% wealth tax on India's billionaires could support our nutrition programme for the poor for at least three years, while a 1% tax could fund the PM-Jan Arogya Yojana medical insurance scheme for 18 months. A narrower income gap would also reduce feelings of resentment or alienation among those who feel left behind, leading to better social cohesion.

Critics argue that any income ceiling would disincentivize entrepreneurship and hard work, and that individuals may be less motivated to excel or invest in businesses, potentially stifling economic growth. They may also argue that foreign investment will dry up or talent migration will occur, impacting the economy's competitiveness and growth potential. They are right, but such problems can be resolved if ceilings and taxation rates are judiciously picked and only individuals are brought under this net.

Indeed, there will be administrative challenges like determining thresholds, moni-

toring compliance, preventing evasion and devoting resources for the same. Any drastic measure like the 2016 demonetization to cap income or wealth could lead to unintended consequences such as capital flight or migration of high net-worth individuals (HNIs). Arguments against a wealth cap often centre about it.

Here is how we could go about it. *First*, establish a framework for a wealth ceiling. Determine the maximum allowable wealth for the top 1% of individuals or households by using data analysis and economic modelling. Perhaps look at per capita GDP and income distribution data to arrive at a ceiling based on a multiple of the country's average income or wealth.

*Second*, frame a policy for sharply progressive taxation. High taxes can be imposed on assets exceeding a set limit. Consider higher capital gains, inheritance or wealth taxes

aimed at the ultra-wealthy. The revenue generated should be directed at social welfare programmes for the needy.

*Third*, improve monitoring and enforcement. Use artificial intelligence to predict and track individuals' assets and wealth accumulation, including *benami* (identity disguised) deals such as those seen with corporate social responsibility spending, to ensure compliance with the set limits. Also use financial and forensic audits, asset declarations and severe penalties for non-compliance, as some developed nations do.

*Fourth*, address various challenges and potential impacts that can be anticipated well in advance, such as the following: *One*, as introducing a wealth cap may adversely impact economic incentives for investment, entrepreneurship and innovation, use data analysis to weigh the potential effects on economic growth and productivity. *Two*, as implementing and administering such a policy requires significant resources and administrative capabil-

ities, ensure accuracy in wealth assessments and the prevention of evasion. *Three*, any concern over the potential impact on international competitiveness and the potential migration of HNIs and businesses to other countries with relatively favourable tax environments should be evaluated and acted upon accordingly. *Four*, do an analysis of the impact of a wealth cap on social cohesion, income mobility and wealth distribution. Data on income and wealth inequality trends, poverty rates and social indicators should be considered and closely monitored.

*Fifth*, invest in educating the 1% at the top of the pyramid and mobilizing the support of the rest. It would be crucial for the public to understand the rationale behind a wealth ceiling. To garner popular support, provide data-driven explanations and appeal to the social conscience of people on matters of income inequality, wealth distribution and the potential benefits of such a policy.

*Lastly*, but most importantly, have a heart and the political will to walk the talk on poverty alleviation and corruption elimination that has graced Indian elections down the decades with an almost fairy-tale-like presence. It is time to start heeding the voice of the 99%.

## MY VIEW | TIGHTROPE WALK

## Plato was right all along: Those who tell stories do rule the world

The ability to speak in public is perhaps the most powerful force multiplier a leader could deploy



RAGHU RAMAM

is former CEO of the National Intelligence Grid, distinguished fellow at Observer Research Foundation and author of 'Everyman's War'.

Last week, I was at TEDx Gateway, one of the largest talk events of this global movement created by Chris Anderson. While each one of the 20 odd speakers was brilliant, I could sense a deep desire among several in the audience to be on stage. Each of them, like all of us, had their own gripping stories to tell. And so they wished they could—if only they had the courage to get up on stage and take the microphone.

Glossophobia, as the dread of public speaking is known, is one of the most prevalent challenges for leaders. Several studies have shown that public-speaking anxiety is the No. 1 fear for most people, even ahead of death! This prompted Jerry Seinfeld to comically remark that most people at a funeral would rather be the person inside the coffin than the one delivering the eulogy. And like most fears that challenge us, we often choose to seek refuge in the myth that public speaking is an inborn gift.

And here is the irony of it. All of us, regardless of our education, exposure, age or experience, have the inborn gift of public speaking. Observe any kindergarten group and you will see that every child is a born orator. Tragically, this innate skill gets crippled by our social and educational conditioning as we grow older.

Having studied the journey of count-

less enthralling speakers' (and also travelling some of that path), I know that the fear of public speaking is essentially traceable to two ancient wirings in our brain.

The first is the fear of standing alone, or of being apart from the crowd. Primordially, isolation meant danger. Even today, ostracization remains a severe societal punishment. The old Arab custom of chopping the right hand of thieves not only created severe disablement, but also ostracized them from communal meals because the left or 'impure' hand could not be used for eating from a common plate. This innate fear is further amplified in our education system, where punishments include public humiliation such as being asked to stand on the chair or in a corner. This is also the main reason that many leaders who have participated in scores of panel discussions are loath to be solo on stage.

The second aspect is that it is not public speaking *per se* that most people are afraid of. Instead, it is the fear of being judged by strangers. For example, you could effortlessly regale your friends with a holiday adventure or an amusing anecdote. But terror could clutch you if you're asked to narrate the same stories on stage. It is not the speaking that causes fear, but the sense of being judged. There may also be some trepidation that someone in the audience knows your talk's subject much better and will call you out on it.

Public speaking is an essential skill for leaders for many reasons. Firstly, innumerable studies have shown that the ability to communicate compellingly is essential to lead well. A large part of Apple's success was Steve Jobs' ability to tell a captivating story. Colonizing Mars, say, cannot be inspired by a memo giving out the calculations and thrust vectors of rockets. Secondly, employees like to work for leaders whose energy and passion they can sense and feel. Leadership is a contact sport in that sense. Be it leading a pla-

toon of soldiers into an assault or attempting an ambitious industrial project, troops rally around a human leader, not a stack of PowerPoint slides that explain strategy or an Excel sheet which shows the project's profitability. But the last reason is perhaps the most important.

Public speaking is not just cognitive skill. Sure, there are structures of storytelling and methods of delivery, etc. that speakers learn and hone. However, public speaking is also a character skill. It requires a leader to not only be knowledgeable, but also demonstrate that she is willing to put herself in a vulnerable spot repeatedly until she has conquered what is arguably one of our biggest fears.

So how does one start? First, we have to realize that, given high enough stakes, everyone has anxiety before they go to stage. Everyone. Speakers who deliver keynote addresses for a living, performers, actors and even politicians are apprehensive of public speaking. The only two categories of people who would not be afraid would be those who don't care about their audience or those whose primal survival instincts are weak. So you are in great company.

Public speaking is like swimming. You need to start doing it. Begin in a shallow pool. Go back to your school or college and talk about your professional journey. Just narrate what you learnt from other leaders. Your talk doesn't have to be about your achievements, it could be a narration of someone else's. Start with low-risk audiences and work your way up.

Lastly, always start with a personal story. For the simple reason that no one can judge you on that. After all, you are the subject expert of you.

Plato's ancient observation that "those who tell stories rule society" holds true even today. The ability to speak in public is probably the most powerful force multiplier that a leader could add to her character skills.

## 10 YEARS AGO



## JUST A THOUGHT

Electric cars aren't pollution-free; they have to get their energy from somewhere.

ALEXANDRA PAUL

## THEIR VIEW

## A cap on capitalism: Is it time for India to debate one?

M. MUNEEER



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Growing income disparity in an economy like India, with over 800 million people deemed in need of free food from the government, does not augur well for its developmental ambitions. India's top 1% own 40% of its total wealth, by one estimate, while the bottom half own just 3%. A recent UN report said the poor in India are unable to afford even basic necessities. Meanwhile, the wealth of the richest individuals has risen sharply in recent years.

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THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

# It's time to put a figure on India's exposure to global value chains

The intricacy of global value chains has resulted in complex dependency patterns whose risks we should track and mitigate



**V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN, PRACHI SINGHAL & MEERA UNNIKRISHNAN** are, respectively, India's chief economic advisor, an officer of the Indian Economic Service, and a young professional attached to the Office of the Chief Economic Advisor.

The world experienced supply disruptions for vaccines and personal protection equipment during the covid pandemic. Subsequently, in the wake of the war in Ukraine, global supply chains for critical commodities such as semi-conductors were disrupted, which in turn impacted automobile manufacturing, among other things. Due to rising tensions, countries are rethinking the concept of efficiencies as the basis of global supply chain arrangements and opting for supply chain security. It has given rise to the concepts of re-shoring and friend-shoring. Given China's impressive and pervasive presence in the global supply chains of many commodities, other countries have been re-assessing their dependence on China. In fact, China too has made it one of its policy goals to reduce dependence on global value chains (GVCs).

In this context, it becomes important to understand how 'exposed' our manufacturing sectors are to the rest of the world, and especially to China. A birds-eye view of exposure can be provided by bilateral trade deficits. For instance, India's industrial sector trade deficit with China has risen over the years, touching \$84.4 billion in 2022 (27% higher than 2021).

However, bilateral trade does not show the full extent of dependency, as manufacturing industries are scattered across GVCs with several countries playing a part in the production process. Thus, to understand dependency along manufacturing GVCs we replicated seminal work in the area by Richard Baldwin *et al* (2023) ([bit.ly/us3ezMM](https://bit.ly/us3ezMM)). Their research investigated the reliance of the US's manufacturing sector, particularly on Chinese intermediate products using input-output tables of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Baldwin's exercise for the US reveals that the country sources about 87% of its intermediate inputs domestically, whereas 12% of the total are sourced from abroad. Despite such a sizeable domestic share, the US continues to safeguard itself against shocks arising from foreign exposure by re-shoring and friend-shoring its value chains because nearly 28% of all its foreign inputs are sourced from China. The next most significant supplier for the US is Canada, which accounts for 10% of all its foreign inputs.

As per the formula used by Baldwin and others, we calculate two types of exposures. The first is 'face-value exposure,' which looks at the proximate origin of intermediate inputs purchased by India's manufacturing sector. The next is 'look-through exposure,' which cuts a layer deeper to understand where the intermediate inputs them-



selves are sourced from. To illustrate the use of these two measures, let's take for example India's electronics sector, which may source intermediate inputs from Vietnam. Face value exposure would take into account the reliance of India's electronics sector on Vietnamese inputs. Now if Vietnam's suppliers in turn rely on China for inputs, the look-through measure would capture India's reliance on China (through Vietnam).

The implication of a high look-through exposure is two-fold. First, it shows that protectionist measures may just end up lengthening a value chain, without reducing a country's real dependence on a particular seller nation. Thus, even though a country may not be sourcing inputs at face value, these products may enter the market with minor modifications from third-party countries— which the look-through exposure would capture. Second, sectors with higher look-through exposure to a nation would be more prone to supply-chain shocks as their reliance on foreign intermediaries is higher than what is seen in terms of direct 'face-value' linkages.

Exposure calculations for India for 2022 reveal that the foreign exposure of India's manufacturing sector was around 17%, while 83% of the sector's intermediate inputs were sourced domestically. While these numbers may seem reassuring at first glance, they are not necessarily indicative of self-sufficiency in production. A large part of the 83% figure is labour value-addition. Moreover, while 17% foreign exposure might seem relatively modest, it is best not to underplay the number,

since some of those foreign-sourced inputs might be critical.

Indian sectors that are most exposed to foreign intermediates include basic metals, transport equipment, electrical equipment, coke, refined petroleum and nuclear fuel. Further, on a look-through basis, China on average accounts for 23% of all foreign inputs sourced. This is more than three times higher than the next highest supplier, the US, which accounts for 6% of all foreign inputs sourced.

This exposure exercise, done for 2012 and 2000 as well (apart from 2022), reveals an increase in India's look-through exposure to China across the decades, even though face-value exposure shows a decline. Between 2000 and 2022, China's share of foreign inputs purchased by Indian manufacturers rose sharply from 5% to 23%.

Our analysis shows that the story of India's exposure to various nations, like the intricacy of GVCs themselves, is much more nuanced than what meets the eye. An exercise of understanding exposures along GVCs can improve risk preparedness by identifying the range of essential sectors that could be prone to geopolitical shocks. Second, to the extent that some of this exposure seems unavoidable for some time to come, it may be useful to examine the ways in which the risks of such dependence could be mitigated. Is it less risky to source the inputs through trade or by onshoring their production by encouraging foreign direct investment in India?

*These are the authors' personal views.*

# The covid bug's spread didn't even spare faraway Antarctica

How it reached there is a lesson in humility for humanity at large



**FAYE D. FLAM** is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering science.



Even the frozen continent couldn't keep the Sars-CoV-2 virus out

Covid was not supposed to get to Antarctica. If any place had a hope of keeping the virus out, it would be a continent with no permanent residents and an annual visiting population of only 5,000. And every control measure was in place—testing, a strict quarantine of everyone visiting, deep sanitation, masks and social distancing.

Yet, the virus got there in December 2020, less than a year into the pandemic. It arrived at the Chilean base first, spreading to at least 36 people. It later reached the Belgian base and the Argentinian base, as well as French and British outposts. In 2022, there was a big outbreak at the US McMurdo station, one at New Zealand's Scott base and even a few cases at the South Pole.

Four years after the pandemic started, the frozen continent holds a lesson for the world in how much control we ever had over covid. Back in March 2020, leaders worldwide talked about getting things under control, without thinking through what this entailed.

Covid in Antarctica "tells us a lot about human arrogance in terms of being above nature and being able to manage all that happens in nature," said Daniela Liggett, a social scientist at the University of Canterbury who studies Antarctic politics and environmental management. "We couldn't even lock away this one piece of the planet where nobody lives and protect it from the virus." She explored the situation and its implications in a paper earlier this month in the journal *Science Advances*.

Humanity can control what we dump into the environment and emit into the atmosphere. We can exert some control over activities that may transfer animal viruses to humans. But after that, it's nearly impossible to vacuum up plastic pollution or control a virus that's already spread far and wide.

By the end of March 2020, covid had reached every continent on the planet except for Antarctica, where the summer research season was underway. Before that season was over, most research and tourism to the continent was paused. Scientists scheduled to continue experiments or collect field data were kept out. As months went by, Antarctica went into its dark, cold winter season, and its small skeleton crews remained isolated.

When the next summer research season began in late 2020, some researchers and support staff were allowed to return following a strict quarantine. To get to the New Zealand base, people had to be tested and then hole up alone in a hotel room for two weeks, Liggett said, while continuing to

undergo daily testing. Once vaccines became available to the general public, the US programmes and others required everyone to be up-to-date on their shots.

Despite all this, disease found a way to sneak in and spread. It doesn't mean Antarctica's policy was a failure. (I couldn't find a record of any deaths.) It showed the futility of going for total containment or elimination by cancelling activities and using quarantines, testing and masks. But rejecting all those measures would have increased the number of cases and the odds that people would die. Before the vaccines became available, it wasn't that rare for seemingly healthy people to get a severe case. Such cases could turn more deadly in a remote outpost far from a hospital.

The decision to resume Antarctic research activity struck a balance between risks of disease and the benefits of conducting research that cannot be done elsewhere. The Antarctic regions not covered in ice are full of lakes where scientists have found improbable life forms, giving them clues to the way life might survive on other worlds. Some scientists are monitoring the effects of global warming on the ice sheets and others are monitoring the accumulation of microplastics and PFAS (forever chemicals) on the Antarctic ice and in surrounding seas.

Shutting down everything even for part of one season had consequences. Careers were derailed, said Liggett, because researchers couldn't get to the continent to finish field studies or experiments. For young investigators in competitive fields, that could make the difference between getting established and starting over.

Now, she said, researchers in Antarctica don't spend all that much time worrying about covid. They've moved on. And doing research in such extreme conditions has always required some appetite for balancing risk and reward.

Today, fact checkers try to argue that the virus is 'under control' in the US despite a continued weekly death toll in the hundreds. But what counts as 'under control' is inherently subjective and often politically malleable.

We cannot really control what's already unleashed. The best we can hope for is finding a balance, imposing precautions but also accepting some risk.

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MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

# Bengaluru should aim to be Kongjian Yu's sponge city

SIDDHARTH PAI



is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

India's information technology (IT) capital, Bengaluru, a city once lauded for its greenery, grapples with the formidable challenge of both urban flooding and water scarcity. The paradox of a city inundated yet thirsty is stark. Its water ordeal is a tale of many years of ecological neglect and urban mismanagement. Rampant urbanization and increased coverage of the city's surface with asphalt and concrete have obliterated natural water absorption and drainage pathways, exacerbating monsoon floods and leading to severe water scarcity in dry seasons. Groundwater levels have plummeted and the city's reliance on distant water sources is unsustainable and precarious.

Laments abound on social media about how the city has trampled its founder Kempegowda's original plan of a network of lakes and inter-linked canals that kept the city flood-free during the rains and sufficiently watered during its hot, dry seasons. But it is difficult to blame any single person or group. All the residents of Bengaluru are culpable.

The unravelling of Kempegowda's vision and drying out of its many lakes and tanks has gone on for decades. For instance, Miller's Tank, which existed in my childhood, was 'bunded' and dried out even before I finished school. The lake-bed housed a slum for many years before giving way to a hospital, offices, auditoriums and housing long before Bengaluru was even on the IT map.

An answer to the city's crisis may lie in the visionary concepts of Kongjian Yu, a Chinese urban planner and landscape architect renowned for his 'sponge city' initiative. Yu, a recent winner of the Oberlander Prize for architecture ([bit.ly/49XHZdm](https://bit.ly/49XHZdm)), has been credited with rejuvenating China's overgrown cities and his ideas are being proposed for other urban dystopias like New York City and Los Angeles. I am no urban planner, but it seems that Bengaluru, the city of lakes that seemingly forgot how to manage its water, could solve its water woes by transforming into a sponge city.

At its core, the concept is ingeniously simple. The basic idea is for cities to absorb, clean and use rainwater efficiently and sustainably. Imagine a Bengaluru where, instead of concrete jungles that repel water, urban landscapes mimic sponges, soaking up rainwater to reduce flooding, replenish

groundwater and even purify water for reuse. Yu's methods use green roofs, permeable pavements, wetlands, rain gardens and enhanced green spaces. The philosophy underpinning his concepts is not just about managing water, but harmonizing urban development with nature's cycles.

In a recent interview with *Wired*, Yu says, "A sponge city can be on any scale. Water is precious. If you retain water in your backyard, you don't have to water your trees, you don't have to water your garden, because water is underneath—your treasure is here. It's at a personal, individual, community scale." ([bit.ly/4973EPm](https://bit.ly/4973EPm)).

To be fair, the city's water authority did try several times to make its residents install 'rain-water recharge systems' in their homes. When I installed such a system in my house many years ago, I remember asking a neighbour why he hadn't done so. He mumbled something about not being given enough incentives to do it. His home has now been

pulled down and is giving way to a massive, ugly concrete block of apartments that will likely house a hundred people where six once lived.

Bengaluru can use Yu's methods to increase its permeable surfaces, step up groundwater recharging and provide natural flood defences. Lakes and tanks in Bengaluru should be restored to the extent possible and reintegrated with a managed network to act as storage reservoirs. By cleaning, desilting and reconnecting these water bodies, we can restore their role in the city's water management strategy.

More practically, adopting permeable pavements in public spaces, creating wetlands and rain gardens in urban areas and installing green roofs on buildings can significantly increase the city's capacity to absorb and utilize rainwater. These measures can also reduce the burden on drainage systems and mitigate flooding.

Turning Bengaluru into a sponge city would require a collaborative effort by the

government, private sector and the community. Incentives for green infrastructure development, public awareness campaigns on water conservation and community-led projects could spearhead this transformation. A recent advertisement in a newspaper had the local water authorities asking firms to use their corporate social responsibility (CSR) monies to help, harkening back to a column I wrote in this space asking Bengaluru's IT firms to belly up to the bar to help restore the city. ([bit.ly/3Pq62tl](https://bit.ly/3Pq62tl))

The path to becoming a sponge city is challenging. Land use planning needs to be revisited, with a focus on sustainable development that prioritizes water management. Financial investment is crucial, as is the political will to undertake such a transformation. However, the benefits—reduced flooding, enhanced water security, improved urban biodiversity and a better quality of life—make for a compelling case.

"The sponge city is basically using free nature," Yu says in his interview. "It's simple. The problem is that it's free. No one wants to invest in it, because no one can make money." Yet, the vision of a city in harmony rather than battle with water is both inspiring and essential. Use of CSR money might be the watershed moment it needs.

**The city should use this urban planner's ideas to achieve harmony with natural water cycles**

## Future of Oil

The world stands at a crossroads, where the narrative of oil, once synonymous with prosperity and power, now faces a reckoning. The next 50 years will see a significant shift in the dynamics of the oil industry, moving away from matching supply with increasing demand towards a focus on reducing demand due to climate change concerns. The transition away from fossil fuels, though not immediate or drastic, marks a turning point in climate negotiations. As we look back on the past 50 years, it becomes evident that the trajectory of our energy consumption is unsustainable. The recent shift in focus, as acknowledged in a significant declaration last December, signals a pivotal moment in the history of the oil industry - one that demands reflection and action. For decades, nations and economies have been entwined with the fortunes of oil, shaping policies, geopolitics, and global economics. From the oil shocks of the 1970s that sent shockwaves through markets to the steady rise in carbon emissions, the story of oil has been one of triumph and turbulence. Yet, amidst the gleaming skyscrapers of oil-rich nations, there lies a paradox. The vulnerability of arid lands to the impacts of climate change starkly contrasts with the opulence fuelled by oil wealth. The recent call to transition away from fossil fuels reflects a growing awareness of the existential threat posed by climate change. It acknowledges the need to break free from the shackles of dependency on finite resources and embrace sustainable alternatives. This shift, though gradual and incremental, marks a departure from the status quo - a recognition that business as usual is no longer tenable in a world facing unprecedented environmental challenges.

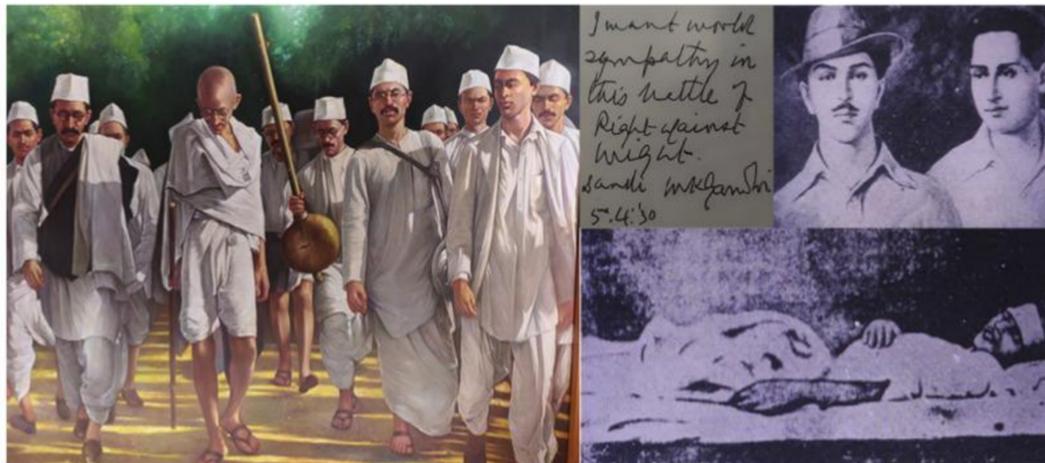
However, the road ahead is fraught with uncertainties and complexities. Oil-producing nations, accustomed to wielding influence and power through their resource abundance, now face the daunting task of charting a new course for their economies. The transition away from oil will require careful planning, investment in renewable energy infrastructure, and diversification of economic sectors. It is a journey fraught with risks and opportunities, where the choices made today will shape the future for generations to come. Similarly, for Western oil companies, the shift towards renewable energy represents both a challenge and an opportunity. As the demand for oil wanes, these companies must adapt their business models to thrive in a rapidly evolving energy landscape. Embracing sustainability and innovation will be a key to their survival in a world increasingly focused on reducing carbon emissions and mitigating climate change. Ultimately, the transition away from fossil fuels is not just an economic imperative but a moral one. It is a collective responsibility to safeguard the planet for future generations and ensure a sustainable future for all. As we reflect on the past 50 years of the oil industry, let us seize this moment as an opportunity to chart a new course - one guided by principles of sustainability, equity, and resilience. The journey ahead will be challenging, but with bold leadership and concerted action, the world can build a future where energy is clean, abundant, and accessible to all.

## Double-edged

In the midst of a global pandemic and economic uncertainty, India has witnessed an unprecedented surge in retail investors flocking to the stock market. The numbers speak volumes. From just 31 million individuals registered to trade on the National Stock Exchange in March 2020, the figure has ballooned to over 90 million unique accounts today. This dramatic shift in behaviour reflects a seismic change in India's middle-class culture of saving, where traditionally, low-risk assets like gold and real estate dominated investment portfolios. Several factors have converged to fuel this phenomenon. First and foremost is the rapid expansion of India's digital infrastructure, coupled with widespread internet access. Government initiatives have streamlined processes, allowing individuals to open bank and trading accounts in minutes and facilitating frictionless digital payments. Furthermore, the pandemic served as a catalyst, forcing households to re-evaluate their financial strategies and seek avenues for higher returns on savings. Investment platforms have capitalised on this momentum, offering user-friendly interfaces that have democratised stock market participation like never before. Moreover, years of aggressive advertising by the mutual fund industry have ingrained in the Indian psyche the notion that equities are a viable means of wealth accumulation. This, coupled with a buoyant market fuelled by robust GDP growth and a sense of national economic optimism, has created a perfect storm of investor enthusiasm. However, amidst the euphoria lies a palpable sense of caution. Market observers, including the Securities and Exchange Board of India, have sounded alarm bells about the dangers of speculative behaviour and overvaluation. The influx of inexperienced investors, drawn in by social media influencers touting get-rich-quick schemes, has raised concerns about market stability. The surge in registrations, particularly among first-time investors, has led to fears that many may be ill-prepared for market downturns and could face significant losses, potentially souring their appetite for equity investments in the long term. While the influx of retail investors into the stock market represents a democratisation of wealth creation and a departure from traditional asset allocation strategies, it also underscores the need for greater investor education and regulatory oversight. As the market regulator urges caution and asset managers counsel against speculative excess, it is imperative that investors approach the stock market with a measured understanding of the risks involved. Ultimately, the rise of India's retail investors is a double-edged sword. While it signals a burgeoning appetite for wealth creation and financial independence among the middle class, it also poses challenges in terms of market stability and investor protection. As India's economy continues to evolve and its stock market expands, striking a balance between enthusiasm and prudence will be essential to ensuring sustainable growth and prosperity for all stakeholders.

# Salt of the Earth

Gandhiji's Dandi March, as the Salt Satyagraha is referred to, was defying British laws prohibiting common manufacture of salts in India: it sparked the imagination of the people, near and far through March to May 1930. It was an intensely active non-violent revolution which brought to the fore what Raja Rammohun Roy had enumerated in 1831, almost a hundred years earlier



Long before the Salt Satyagraha was launched by Mahatma Gandhi from Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad on 12 March 1930, there were popular uprisings, hunger-strikes in jails, workers' strikes and public processions denouncing the ruthless colonial rule subjugating the country. British authorities were alarmed and determined to put an end to these demonstrations through beatings, police firings and indescribable tortures. Gandhiji's Dandi March, as the Salt Satyagraha is referred to, was defying British laws prohibiting common manufacture of salts in India: it sparked the imagination of the people, near and far through March to May 1930. It was an intensely active non-violent revolution which brought to the fore what Raja Rammohun Roy had enumerated in 1831, almost a hundred years earlier.

Standing before the ad hoc Committee of the British parliament in London, Rammohun Roy left no one in any illusion about the plunder and self-serving nature of the English East India Company.

The Company had run a deplorable drainage of the Indian economy, sacrificing the interests of millions of Indians to profit for an English elite. This was several decades before Dadabhai Naoroji and RC Dutt could spell out 'the drain of wealth' theory with more hard-hitting facts.

He denounced abuses of the Company concerning salt trade in India; pointing out that in Bengal alone, 125,000 manufacturers of salt (molunghi) had become victims of this severe monopoly of the English.

The patriotic fervor seen during the Dandi March was building up with the Meerut Conspiracy case of 20 March 1929, and the publicity it received in India and overseas.

The British carried out widespread simultaneous searches throughout India and arrested 31 Communist and trade union leaders. They wanted to prove in court that "Communists were anti-religion, anti-national and anti-everything that is civilised in society".

Harold Laski, the British political scientist, likened the Meerut trial "to the class of cases of which the Mooney trial and the Sacco-Vanzetti trial in America, Dreyfus trial in France, the Reichstag fire trial in Germany, are supreme instances."

With the nationalist press in India, and Communist press abroad, giving full publicity, the

Meerut Conspiracy case became widely known, inspiring a new generation of Indian revolutionaries.

Sure enough, the second Meerut Conspiracy shook the colonial government. On 8 April 1929, in the Central Legislature at Delhi, the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Dispute Bill were certified as lawful acts by the Viceroy.

Immediately, in protest of such anti-working class activity of the Government, the revolutionary Bhagat Singh and Batukeswar Dutta threw two bombs in the Legislature hall. They did not try to escape, instead shouted: "Long Live Revolution", "Down with imperialism", "Workers of the World Unite" and distributed handbills, published in the name of Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA), headlined, "In order that the deaf might listen, the noise must be powerful." When Jatin Das, another HSRA revolutionary, died in Lahore Jail after a 63-day hunger strike on 13 September

1929, patriotism and anti-British emotions reached new pitch with leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Durgavati Devi joining a massive funeral procession in Calcutta four days later, an unprecedented outpouring of compassion and empathy for the sacrifices of HSRA revolutionaries. From Bengal came another show of anti-British power in the jute mills of Chengail and Bauria where workers began a long strike, refusing to bow before police attacks and retrenchment.

By July-August 1929, the first general strike of jute works assumed historic proportions: a record 192,000 jute workers of Bengal were united through this struggle. Leaders like Abdul Momin, Abdur Rezzak Khan, Kali Sen and Dr Bhupendranath Dutta were engaged in these struggles, a recurring nightmare for the Government.

With these fires of freedom burning in 1929, the Congress at its Lahore session in December, resolved for complete Independence or Poorna Swaraj.

On 26 January 1930, Independence Day was observed all over the country. The pledge was taken for not resting till complete Independence was gained when the national flag was unfurled.

It was in this political context that Mahatma Gandhi on 11 March 1930 announced the Dandi March, at the evening prayer held on Sabarmati sands with a 10,000-strong crowd listening to his memorable dramatic speech.

He said, "In all probability this will be my last speech to you. Even if the Government allows me to march tomorrow morning, this will be my last speech on the sacred banks of the Sabarmati. Possibly these may be the last words of my life here. I have already told you yesterday what I had to say. Today I shall confine myself to what you should do after my companions and I are arrested. The programme of the march to Jalalpur must be fulfilled as originally settled. The enlistment of the volunteers for this purpose should be confined to Gujarat only. From what I have seen and heard during the last fortnight, I am inclined to believe that the stream of civil resisters will flow unbroken."

His emphasis on non-violence was constant: "Let there be not a semblance of breach of peace even after all of us have been arrested. We have resolved to utilize all our resources in the pursuit of an exclusively non-violent struggle. Let no one commit a wrong in anger. This is my hope and prayer. I wish these words of mine reached every nook and corner of the land. My task shall be done if I perish and so do my comrades. It will then be for the Working Committee of the Congress to show you the way and it will be up to you to follow its lead. So long as I have reached Jalalpur, let nothing be done in contravention to the authority vested in me by the Congress. But once I am arrested, the whole responsibility shifts to the Congress. No one who believes in non-violence, as a creed, need therefore sit still. My compact with the Congress ends as soon as I am arrested. In that case volunteers, wherever possible, civil disobedience of salt should be started. These laws can be violated in three ways. It is an offence to manufacture salt wherever there are facilities for doing so. The possession and sale of contraband salt, which includes natural salt or salt earth, is also an offence. The purchasers of such salt will be equally guilty. To

carry away the natural salt deposits on the seashore is likewise violation of law. So is the hawking of such salt. In short, you may choose any one or all of these devices to break the salt monopoly."

"I stress only one condition, namely, let our pledge of truth and nonviolence as the only means for the attainment of Swaraj be faithfully kept," he explained, "For the rest, every one has a free hand. But that does not give a license to all and sundry to carry on their own responsibility. Wherever there are local leaders, their orders should be obeyed by the people. Where there are no leaders and only a handful of men have faith in the programme, they may do what they can, if they have enough self-confidence...Our ranks will swell and our hearts strengthen, as the number of our arrests by the Government increases."

Gandhiji's focus was not just on salt alone, his words, "the Liquor and foreign cloth shops can be picketed. We can refuse to pay taxes if we have the requisite strength. Lawyers can give up practice. Public can boycott law courts; Government servants can resign their posts. People quake with fear of losing employment. Such men are unfit for Swaraj... If, therefore, we are sensible enough, let us bid good-bye to Government employment, no matter if it is the post of a judge or a peon. Let all who are co-operating with the Government in one way or another, be it by paying taxes, keeping titles, or sending children to official schools, etc. withdraw their co-operation in all or as many ways as possible. Then there are women who can stand shoulder to shoulder with men in this struggle." "You may take it as my will," he said, adding "It was the message that I desired to impart to you before starting on the march or for the jail. I wish that there should be no suspension or abandonment of the war that commences tomorrow morning or earlier, if I am arrested before that time. A Satyagrahi, whether free or incarcerated, is ever victorious. He is vanquished only, when he forsakes truth and nonviolence and turns a deaf ear to the inner voice. God bless you all and keep off all obstacles from the path in the struggle that begins tomorrow."

(Photos: Bhagat Singh, Batukeswar Dutta, Jatin Das on death-bed; painting at Sabarmati Ashram depicting Gandhiji leading the march)

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

## Shallow grounds

SIR, This refers to the editorial, "Simultaneous polls" (18 March). The High Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, has unanimously recommended that polls to the Lok Sabha, state legislative assemblies, municipalities and panchayats be held at the same time. 'One nation, one election' is arguably the final big item on its agenda that the BJP has addressed before the General Election.

A common voter list is undoubtedly a sound idea that will find acceptance across the board,

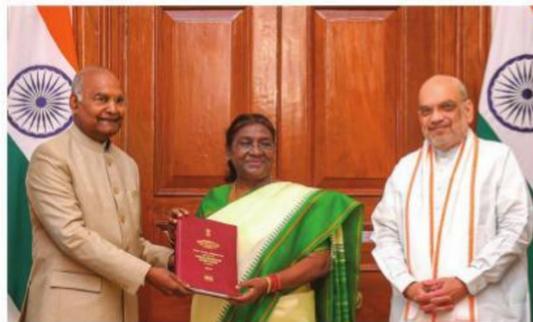
but the same is not true for simultaneous polls. Parliamentary and Assembly elections have different dynamics and issues at stake. It will "kill diversity" and mixing national and state polls is "injustice to the interest of the state".

State funding of elections is a more effective reform to tackle inefficiency. It is foolhardy to indulge in a blind pursuit of governance efficiency and economic growth at the cost of federalism and unity of a large, diverse and fractious nation such as ours.

"One nation, one election" is a politically unfeasible, adminis-

tratively unworkable and constitutionally unviable proposition. The idea is premised on flimsy and shallow grounds of cost sav-

ings, policy paralysis, governance interference and, now, the shiny new claim of boosting economic growth.



A MEMBER OF THE

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## Crucial role of non-disclosure agreements

The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) has emerged as a transformative force in Bhutan's economic landscape, conceived and designed under the foresightful vision of His Majesty.

It is spearheaded by His Majesty himself as the gatekeeper to ensure its success in the radical economic transformation of the country through the lens of Gross National Happiness. However, as much as the public would like to know more about the city, the publicly available information is limited but not in its implementation.

A substantial component of the implementation for the city is under way which will be visible soon. The information, particularly the details about investors and operational strategies, is unavailable to the public.

This intentional secrecy is not a conventional business approach but is grounded in the highest standards of business ethics, facilitated by a tool that is relatively new in Bhutan - the Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA).

NDA is defined by legal experts as a contractual agreement establishing a confidential relationship between two parties.

It involves one party sharing sensitive information with the other, who, in turn, commits not to disclose that information to any third party.

This legal protection is primarily based on the doctrine of unconscionability, an equitable legal concept that can be used to set aside unfair

KUENSEL

agreements. The enforcement of NDAs in international business communities sets a precedent for Bhutanese investors and businesses.

Understanding the far-reaching implications of NDAs is crucial for protecting business secrets, especially in a nation where such legal mechanisms are relatively new.

Breaching an NDA could lead to significant legal repercussions, including hefty compensation payments, creating a paradigm shift in how Bhutanese businesses approach confidentiality.

NDAs play a pivotal role in GMC, serving as the linchpin to preserve investor confidence and trust. Bhutan can't afford to lose any genuinely interested investors who are willing to accept the unique and uncharted path and model of the city which has never been tried or tested elsewhere.

A new venture based on the GNH concept itself is likely to cause some unease and uncertainty among some investors. Any unnecessary leakage of important information before they begin their investment could be counterproductive for the nation and its city of hope. Further, as Bhutan accepts to become one of the models of ethical business based on fairness and integrity under the watchful eyes of His Majesty and the team, Bhutan cannot afford to engage in any form of legal suit at this stage.

Bhutan, lacking specific NDA legislation, currently relies on the laws of the covenant (agreement). This situation necessitates NDAs as a standard practice which has not been the common practice in Bhutanese society.

This shift marks a departure from Bhutan's traditional culture of gossiping and information sharing information with virtually no or limited legal consequences, to severe legal consequences for breaches.

The introduction of NDAs in GMC signifies a step towards aligning Bhutanese business practices with international standards.

As the business community navigates this new legal landscape, it is crucial to comprehend the intricacies of NDAs, ensuring a balance between protecting sensitive information and maintaining fairness in contractual relationships.

The journey towards economic transformation in GMC necessitates a robust understanding of the numerous types of contracts and covenants in shaping this dream city.

It is difficult to digest the logic of disruption in economic activity due to multiple polls. Out of 47 political parties, 15 were opposed to this idea. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to understand that it is state assemblies that will have to pay the price of synchronisation. This decision which will have a significant impact on the future.

Hence, all efforts should be made to bring many more parties and key stakeholders on board before rolling this out.

In days to come, the legitimate concerns of those who disagree must be heard respectfully, and heeded.

Yours, etc., S S Paul,  
Nadia, 18 March.



**A thought for today**

*Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory*

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

# Meds For All

Generics help lower Indian healthcare costs. But govts still need to intervene, smartly

The cost of treating sickle cell anemia in India is on the verge of crashing. Hydroxyurea, a line of treatment, will now cost less than 1% of current import price. This is on account of a domestic manufacturer announcing it will supply vials at the new price to govt.

Healthcare costs are a source of economic pressure on most Indian families. It's led to govt intervention to improve access to medicines and provide insurance cover to cover emergencies.

**Insurance's limitations** | GOI and states have been the largest combined buyers of group insurance. It's an important safety net for vulnerable households. But its limitation is that it kicks in only in the case of hospitalisation. Medical expenses that don't require hospitalisation put immense strain on household budgets.

**Costly medicines** | National Health Accounts estimates for 2019-20 showed that out-of-pocket expenses make up ₹47 for every ₹100 spent on total healthcare expenditure. This is a high burden on households, by global standards. Moreover, over half of OOPEx is on account of medicines. Getting a grip on the price of medicines is the key to reducing pressure on household budgets.

**Interventions aplenty** | GOI intervenes in the market to keep a check on the price of essential medicines. It has a list of 388 medicines, including stents, where it fixes the maximum price to ensure affordability. Efficacy of govt intervention depends on strategy. Mere price caps don't guarantee accessibility.

**Lessons from states** | States in India play a critical role in healthcare. In terms of current health expenditure in 2019-20, state govts contributed 20%. After individual households, it's states that spent the most on health.

**Big buyer's impact** | Some states have tried to use scale as a way to procure essential medicines at a low cost. An effective example is TN's decision to set up a public corporation in 1995 to procure medicines while retaining quality control. Distribution is decentralised. The basics of this model have been replicated with promising results in terms of access and affordability.

This approach is also useful to treat neglected areas such as snake bite fatalities where the low economic power of most victims doesn't add up to adequate demand for investment. Pooled demand, backed by offtake, will boost domestic industry and save lives.

# Foreigners & Us

*Treating international students with respect and goodwill is an ethical-practical imperative*

What do we feel when Indian students are mistreated on foreign soil, in any way? The incidents are usually one-offs. We take solace from the fact that mistreatment is not systemic, and also from swift and rigorous application of law. These are reassurances we too must offer to students we host. Police must act against *everyone* involved in the Saturday night assault on some international students, at Gujarat University.

**Reciprocity of tolerance** | Reports say that the assault took place on the university's hostel premises, set off merely by some international students offering namaz, that too during the holy month of Ramzan. A student from Sri Lanka, one from Afghanistan and another from Turkmenistan had to be admitted to a hospital. India's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to every citizen. When Indians go abroad to study and work, they count on similar freedom. Reciprocal tolerance is both an ethical and practical imperative.

**Wealth of nations** | America to Australia, rich countries have been becoming richer from international students and workers they attract. The enrichment is economic and cultural, and also geopolitical. Foreigners' campus experiences ultimately build up to enduring diplomatic benefits. Recognising its soft power shortfall on this front, China has been pouring big subsidies into attracting foreign students, who now total nearly half a million. This is a number India hopes to achieve by 2047, from only around 50,000 right now.

**Collabs of the future** | Student travel circuits are built over time and in significant part by word of mouth. Research and partnerships of university years seed leaderships from startups to governance. However significant such transformations are on the macro scale, they are even more acutely felt at individual, intimate levels. Communication and collaboration skills gained in internationalised classrooms, are priceless in the new knowledge economy. We must remember this.

# Pather Paunchali

*Weighing in on Amdavadi footpaths vs Panaji pavements*

Kannan.Somasundaram@timesgroup.com

When you walk, Marie Kondo supposedly strides across your brain and kicks out thought-junk. But many Indian cities have pedestrian ideas about improving pavements. In Ahmedabad, most pavements are the size of a toddler's vocabulary – spanning essentials such as 'bow-bow' and 'morkortyle'.

Six bow-bows and 18 illegally parked morkortyles muddle an average Amdavadi footpath stretch. In that setting, walking 5km to clear your head will jam your skull with traffic and canine snarls.

But why 5km? Psyche cleansing worth 10km will be too abrasive for beginners. They will produce Dad jokes: 'Inequality is rampant! Look at Vidyt Jammwal, the world is divided between Abs and Abs-Nots! And 3km won't get you much mileage on Facebook.'

In Delhi, if you veer onto the road accidentally, people in mega-modern cars imply you are a jaywalker from the Stone Age. 'Oye, BC!' they holler.

No such dating is required in Panaji. Roamers have enough space to avoid any relationship with vehicle owners.

The pavement from Miramar to the jetty is as wide as Shakespeare's lexicon. Some scholars claim the patch paid back Will with a revelation. During a Miramar stroll, Will shooed away autograph-hunting tourists. 'Et tu brutish selfie-takers', he apparently shouted. On the spot, he sussed out that the line could be knifed a bit and used in a murder scene.

So you should be kind to first-time walkers when they get carried away by Miramar's unspoilt prairie of paver blocks.

On a recent lam post-work walk, a novice charged past Kala Academy to keep up with colleagues. His thighs tightened like his parents' faces had when he told them he wanted to become a journalist, not a cardiologist.

He pressed on, his body hauling his paunch – imagine a cashew bearing the load of an Alphonso mango. Outside the forest department's park, aches amassed around his waist. Fat cells mobilised against the sudden attempt to evict them from their residence of 50+ years.

On the Mandovi, the gambling vessels are islands of illuminated cassata, the perfect FB background for the 'workout picture'. Stumbling on, 2.5km was recorded. The return journey was a cakewalk: he looked for a bakery to give himself a fitness reward. Colleagues' rebuke was tart.

'Did you play poker?' somebody asked him after looking at the casino picture. 'I am not a card-iologist remember?' he said. Marie, clearly 5km is not enough to get a tidy, pun-free head.

# 'Saving animals is ethical, it's evocative. And it's smart business'

*Speciesism is the illusion that only human lives matter because only humans create value. Our health & wealth are deeply connected to all animals. Industry relies on conservation of nature. CSR must focus on all life*

Meera Jain



One trillion animals disappear from our planet each year. Eighty billion livestock are farmed for food. Two million species face extinction today.

A hundred and fifty million are still taken in poaching and trophy hunting. It's all game.

A hundred and fifty thousand animals perish every minute.

These numbers are not valuations of companies. They are an anthology of loss. These are ledgers of lives, precipitously vanishing from Earth. These are also reflections of how we have come to view the world of animals through the lens of a mind-numbing commodification – indeed, we think of the lives lost each year as '360 million tonnes consumed worldwide'.

My keynote today is to unlock your conscience.

We are not waiting for the Sixth Extinction. We are already in the Sixth Extinction.

As apex predator, we have reshaped the world according to our own image – but at the cost of our fellow sentient beings and homeplanet.

And our actions bear a huge price, way beyond our own narrow anthropocentric plans. On last count, humanity has wiped out 60% of the world's wildlife since 1970 – thanks to Alfred Nobel's gunpowder. So much for the Nobel Prize.

But humanity can also protect our fellow animals, our common home and hearth, Earth, which we share as kin when we say, 'Vasudev Kutumb'.

The expansive 'kutumb' cannot be confined to Homo sapiens alone.

Now for a personal story. I recently visited an animal rescue and rehab centre.



RARER & RARER: Black Rhinos (above) and Hummingbirds (below)

Here, elephants, big cats, birds, reptiles and other endangered species have been saved from poachers, traffickers and circuses globally. Today, they are looked after by dedicated conservationists from around the world.

From medicine to massages, organic nourishment to surgeries, these animals enjoy the warmth of positive reinforcement. The effort to achieve this transforms humanity. There is a genius within us that is sparked when we channel our intrinsic empathy.

I would like to personally recognise Anant – 'Infinity' personified – for his dedication in creating the 'Star of the Forest', Vantara. In his own words, "This is an attempt to heal the environment. It is a start at rebuilding our bond with animals."

As his father proudly told us the next day – he has turned Charles Darwin's

theory of 'Survival of the fittest' on its head, making it 'Protection of the weakest'.

Then there is Ratan Tata's state-of-the-art hospital for small animals. This marks a good and great use of CSR. I urge the many directors across Tata companies to follow suit, by putting enhanced CSR into animal welfare, something that Mr Tata himself will surely approve of.

These are world-encompassing views that should evoke an all-life, all-planet response from us. After all, what is human progress? Is it only to be captured by the likes of GDP or per capita growth? Are all these parameters real or just an illusion?

Most businesses plan their CSR only in adjacencies, to get clackbacks, for their own enterprise. A focus on all life provides a first-mover advantage – a FOMO game-changer in CSR across industry.

Who knows? Entertainment media could be Evoked to develop Christopher Nolan's next Dark Knight crusading

against animal oppression. Pharma could strive to make medicine accessible to all animals. Construction could create equitable ways to build, which safeguard the habitat of animals and birds.

The Military Industrial Complex could report the number of animal casualties and not just humans. Other species cannot be collateral damage and waved off as 'stuff happens'. The media accent on humans is also an iatrogenic of democracy because only humans can vote.

I invite you to re-evaluate your business strategies and AOPs. There are real-world consequences to losing the kingdom of animals. Without them, human lives will not only be far less magical but also economically unstable. There is a link between industry and animals. This appears when we look at the macro picture, which doesn't only mean 'macroeconomics'. It means viewing our planet's spread and contextualising our own lives within this.

Many of our guests are achievers who have blazed paths of great success. Today, several of us are engaged in succession planning, seeking to smoothly hand over our life's work to our next generation. However, we must be aware that we often fall prey to an adversary lingering within the chamber of our own mind. This is speciesism, the illusion that only human lives matter because only humans can create value.

Such narcissism is perilous. It shrinks our understanding of the wondrous architecture of life.

It also hides the real math that underpins our existence.

Did you know, nature's ecosystems generate a hundred and forty trillion dollars of value each year? This comprises everything animals do from tiny bees to trophic predators.

Industry relies on the conservation of nature.

Saving animals is ethical. It's evocative. It's also smart business.

This article, by the founder of Times Evoke, is based on her speech at The Economic Times Awards

# Talk Is On TikTok, Target Is Beijing

*As US follows India in banning TikTok, it's misplaced to see this as unfair clampdown. Protection of data and natsec drive the ban on Chinese apps. Btw, it's a windfall for YouTube & Insta*

Nikhil Pahwa



Ulhas Kamathe became famous on TikTok in 2019 for something remarkably trivial: millions logged in, daily, to watch him take a sip of apple juice or a bite of a slice of pizza, reach for a chicken dish, and say "chicken leg piece" before proceeding to take a bite. This spawned a "chicken leg bis" meme on TikTok, with several people, especially from the West, mimicking him for laughs.

US House of Representatives passed a bipartisan bill to ban TikTok, with only approval from Senate, and Biden's assent, required. Unless TikTok's parent company ByteDance sells its controlling stake to an entity not from China, Russia, Iran or North Korea, or the law gets overturned in courts, the app will be banned in US, losing out on a key market. TikTok has around 170m users in US, not much lower than the 200m it had in India before it was banned in 2020, along with 58 other Chinese apps.

At the time, US was quick to praise, saying the move would "boost India's sovereignty". Trump then issued an executive order banning TikTok, unless a US company acquired it. Microsoft discussed buying TikTok's US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand businesses. Several nations have banned TikTok on govt devices since. The ban on personal devices in US's Montana, was recently blocked by the federal court.

India's ban on TikTok created a multibillion dollar opportunity. Indian short-video startups were funded to make the best of it. Apps like Chingari, Poposo, Moj, Josh, MX Takatak, Mitron and Punch strived to attract a 200m user base who needed somewhere to go, but struggled for either users or revenue. Yet, key beneficiaries of India's ban have been Instagram and YouTube, which launched their own short-video offerings – Reels and Shorts – within months.

The ban could easily have been challenged over its weak legal basis. Banning of apps using blocking provisions of India's infotech law, meant to address illegal content, can easily be seen as being disproportionate. By banning accounts and apps, you not only hinder access to legitimate freedom of expression, you also shutter future speech.

Internet's an enabler to bring the world together, and as a global marketplace for speech and business. So, the idea of banning apps from any particular country seems abhorrent. A ban on Chinese apps, however, seemed like the right thing to do.

TikTok's been criticised for lack of child protection measures. There are worries about algorithms that can manipulate news feeds, bias Beijing's wishes. Concerns exist about money laundering and extortion by predatory lending apps, operating from China, with user data transferred to servers in China. FBI's also said apps run by Chinese companies collect tonnes of personal information, from biometric, contact lists, location, log, communication metadata, to credit card details. Legal agreements for data storage and privacy policies can obfuscate the transfer of data to entities working with Beijing.

China has state control of such companies. China's National Intelligence Law ensures organisations and citizens support its 'national intel' efforts, including extraterritorially, especially at agencies' behest. China's Cybersecurity Law states 'network operators', which could include social media platforms, app creators and other tech companies, shall provide support to govt organisations involved in safeguarding national security.

Companies in China may be forced to act as extensions of state intelligence. The Chinese market is largely closed to foreign players, unless they abide by its strict censorship regime.

Thus, our approach towards authoritarian

regimes must be different from our approach towards liberal democracies, where companies can challenge such laws in courts. Our openness cannot be our weakness.

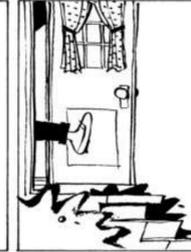
While US is acting only on TikTok, it'd do well to also learn from India's approach towards reducing its dependence on China. GOI appears to be executing a calibrated plan. Apart from banning 509 Chinese apps, it's regulated Chinese investments in Indian businesses, and deployed telecom equipment by incorporating additional approvals processes. It's pushed for handset manufacturing in India. It's imposed restrictions on direct e-commerce imports to address direct purchases from Chinese e-commerce websites like AliExpress.

TikTok creators may have protested the US bill outside the Capitol, but they'll find another platform, if there's a ban. While Kamathe's TikTok channel still exists, with 6.9m followers, he now munches on leg pieces of chicken dishes in videos on a YouTube channel – with 4.7m followers, and an Insta account with 4m followers.

The writer is a technology policy analyst



# Calvin & Hobbes



**Sacredspace**  
Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but I went away hungry from the inhospitable board.  
Henry D Thoreau

# Whatever Happens In Life, I Will Be Happy

Mata Amritanandamayi

Children, like any other decision, happiness is also a decision: 'Whatever happens in life, I will be happy. I will be strong. Because I am not alone. The whole universe, the power of God, is with me.' Even if we laugh or cry, days will pass. So, let us try to smile and be cheerful in the present moment.

Some people want to know if there is a secret to being happy. The secret is that happiness does not lie in the various objects of the world; it is within us. We ourselves are the only source of happiness. If it were really in the objects of the world, then everyone would find happiness in those objects. But what we see is that some people love cigarettes, but others cannot even remain in the same room

with someone smoking one. If happiness were truly in the cigarette, then everyone would love cigarettes. If happiness were in ice cream, then we would all want more and more of it all the time. But after one or two servings, if forced to eat a third, fourth and fifth, the very same ice cream might become a source of sorrow.

Happiness is not in objects; it is within us. This understanding can help us gain control over our desires. When we grasp this truth, we will become more peaceful and that, in turn, will help us to experience our own inner joy.

If we want to cultivate happiness within, there are a few other areas where we can focus on. Firstly, practise being content: This does not mean you

have to curb your ambition, nor to stop earning, but also be content with what you possess. Secondly, practise being selfless: Do not be just a taker but be a giver also. Earn as much as you wish, however, learn to return as much as you can to society. Look beyond your own family to the world

family. Thirdly, follow dharma – a life of values like truthfulness, kindness, and showing others respect. Before acting, always ask yourself, 'Would I want someone else to do this action to me?'

Fourthly, be more action-oriented rather than result-oriented. When you are anxious about the result of a particular action, it not only prevents you from utilising your full potential but also affects the outcome of your action. On

the other hand, when you are completely focused on the action, it helps you tap into your inner capabilities to a great extent, thereby bringing the best out of you. Fifthly, give equal importance to logic and faith – the external world of objectivity and the inner world of subjective reality, the mystery aspect of life. Create a balance between the head and heart. Sixthly, spend some time each day in meditation and pray for divine grace – for the support and blessing of the Whole, of which we are only a small part.

Children, if we can develop these habits, the happiness that is our true inner nature, will manifest outwardly. It will shine in our hearts and in all of our interactions with other people. *Lokah samastah sukhino bhavantu* – May everyone in the world be happy.

March 20 is International Day of Happiness



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Putin's re-election

The world should not let Ukraine war drag on

HAVING secured his fifth term with a landslide victory in the Russian elections, President Vladimir Putin has tightened his grip on power amid allegations of a rigged poll. Emboldened by the overwhelming mandate, Putin has warned the US-led NATO against the deployment of troops in Ukraine, saying that such a move would be one step shy of 'a full-scale World War III'. The West might have dismissed the elections as a sham, but the inescapable fact is that the US and its allies would have to deal with Putin for at least six more years. The 71-year-old has already ruled Russia as President or PM for the past two-and-a-half decades.

Most of Putin's domestic critics are either in jail or in exile, even as his staunchest political enemy, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic Circle prison last month. Navalny's widow Yulia Navalnaya has dubbed the President a killer and a gangster, but he remains stubbornly unfazed. His growing intransigence bodes ill not only for eastern Europe but also for the world at large. It's obvious that the Ukraine war cannot be brought to an end anytime soon unless Putin is persuaded to do a climbdown. Also, the West needs to see the error of its ways.

Countries on good terms with Russia, such as India and China, have a greater role to play in de-escalating hostilities. According to a recent CNN report, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and some other leaders helped prevent a potential nuclear attack by Putin on Ukraine in 2022. Last week, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar admitted that India was involved in efforts to reduce tensions in the Russia-Ukraine war zone. New Delhi, which enjoys a strong relationship with both Washington and Moscow, is well placed to help in finding a peaceful solution.

## Rescue op in the sea

Shining example of India's maritime prowess

THE joint efforts made by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Indian Navy to free the merchant vessel MV Ruen from pirates in the Arabian Sea recently are a shining example of effective maritime security measures and inter-service collaboration. The successful operation saw the IAF's C-17 heavy-lift aircraft execute a precision airborne drop of two combat boats and the Navy's MARCOS commandos. Despite the hostile conditions, the IAF's swift response and delivery played a crucial role in backing the Navy. This resulted in the surrender of 35 pirates and the release of the vessel and its crew. The proactive stance of the Navy, supported by the deployment of warships like INS Kolkata and INS Subhadra, demonstrates India's readiness to safeguard global trade routes.

This isn't the first time the Navy has showcased its capabilities in combating piracy. Over the years, it has undertaken a number of successful operations, including the rescue of the MV Suez in 2011 and thwarting piracy attempts in the Gulf of Aden in 2017. These actions not only protect the interests of the shipping industry but also contribute to international efforts towards maintaining peace and security at sea.

The Navy's approach is in line with international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides the legal framework for combating piracy and ensuring the safety of navigation in international waters. By adhering to the UNCLOS and collaborating with global partners, India has reaffirmed its commitment to upholding maritime law and order and cemented its place as the first responder on the high seas. As piracy continues to pose a threat to shipping trade, India's timely operations serve as a model for other nations.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 1924

## Akali leaders' case

THE sittings of the Punjab Legislative Council on Thursday and Saturday were largely coupled with the consideration of the policy underlying the Akali leaders' case. The discussion arose out of the motion of Rai Bahadur Sewak Ram that the grant in respect of Special Public Prosecutors be reduced, in other words, that the House should express its disapproval of the policy of appointing Special Public Prosecutors. Although the form in which the motion was put before the House was general, it was in reality an attack on the appointment of Special Public Prosecutors in one particular case, the case of the Akali leaders, on the two-fold ground that the case itself ought not to have been started and, having been started, ought now to be dropped. Even if it was considered necessary to continue the prosecution, it should be conducted by ordinary Public Prosecutors and not special ones at a heavy cost to the finances of the Province. On the first point, it was contended by the supporters of the motion that the gentlemen who were being tried were the cream of the Sikh community, that their trial had created a feeling not only among the Sikhs but also among others that the Government was following a vindictive policy, its real object being to put down the Akali movement, and that it was bound to do far greater harm than good, even if it could do any good at all. Who were the men, it was asked, who were on trial? They were the leaders of the SGPC, the representative body of the Sikhs in the matter of gurdwara reforms, whose members had been elected by their free vote.

## Relentless power play in Kathmandu

Prime Minister Prachanda has managed to stay at the helm in one coalition govt after another

MANJEEV PURI  
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO NEPAL

NEPAL now has its third government in barely 15 months. Interestingly, all three have been headed by Pushpa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda, whose Maoist Centre, with 30 seats, finished third in the House of Representatives following the general election in November 2022. The Nepali Congress, with 88 seats in the 275-member House, and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) or CPN-UML, with 78 seats, were the top two parties, but the fractured verdict allowed Prachanda to take pole position.

The first but short-lived alliance was between the CPN-UML and the Maoists; after providing Prachanda a perch for the prime ministership, it dissolved within a month as he switched over to the Nepali Congress. The present alliance, which again brings Prachanda and the CPN-UML together, includes two other Left-leaning parties — the Samajবাদis (Socialists) led by Upendra Yadav and a party of former CPN-UML members under ex-PM Madhav Kumar Nepal.

It may intrigue some that the alliance includes the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP, 21 seats), which projects itself as a platform to espouse the aspirations of the young people and finds favour with the West. This party had earlier been part of the first Maoist-CPN-UML alliance. Its leader, Rabi Lamichhane, who was earlier a US national, is one of the four Deputy Prime Ministers in the present coalition.



BONDING: Nepalese PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal with his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi. The consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya was received with enthusiasm in Nepal. FILE PHOTO

The Nepali economy took a serious hit during the Covid-19 pandemic, but unlike other countries, it is showing little signs of bouncing back. This is leading to despondency among the people, with some even thinking that the monarchy was better, given that the political class has not delivered. Some weeks ago, Kathmandu witnessed a pro-monarchy demonstration.

Prachanda has accused the Nepali Congress of intransigence over the economic issues and justified his shift on that ground. Of course, it was, perhaps, too much for him to have Nepali Congress leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, who has been PM five times, constantly hovering around as the PM-in-waiting.

India has traditionally found dealing with the Nepali Congress easier. The Maoist-Nepali Congress alliance provided a certain comfort shored up by the Nepali Congress leadership's inclination towards reinstating Nepal as a Hindu state. The 2015 Constitution had proclaimed Nepal as a secular

## A continued push for improving the ease of doing business would serve the interests of both India and Nepal.

country. It bears noting that CPN-UML leader KP Sharma Oli has, in the past, also not been averse to a Hindu state and a 'cultural' monarchy in Nepal. The consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya was received with enthusiasm in Nepal and would raise the pitch for a Hindu state.

Prachanda, too, appeared to

be playing a positive role and donned the Nepali formal national dress, *Daura Suruwal*, identified with the Hindu monarchy, after eschewing it for years. However, Prachanda's upbringing has been leftist and anti-monarchy, and it is possible that he now espied an opportunity to push back and bow to the identity politics of Nepal, which is basically about differentiating itself from India. He termed the Nepali Congress "a reactionary force" when he parted ways with it.

References to the role of the South (code name for India) and North (China) are common in explanations of politics in Nepal. Over the past two decades or so, though, the role of the West (the US, EU, etc.), coupled with their NGO associates and the Church, cannot be wished away. It has its own dynamics that include the ideas of human rights and secularism. For some, the inclusion of the RSP in a Left alliance would look like a North-West entente in Nepal.

To many observers, the latest alignment appears to be set-

ting the stage for the next general election in Nepal. But it is three years from now, and one wonders whether Oli will display the patience needed. In 2020, he was unwilling to cede prime ministership to Prachanda despite a power-sharing arrangement. For Prachanda, having already lost much of his sway with the public, joining hands with his old communist comrades may be the only way forward. Though vote transfer from CPN-UML supporters to the Maoists is not easy, transfer from the Nepali Congress to the Maoists is far tougher.

The new alignment provides the Chinese with a reason to gloat. Their role in bringing it about is evident, even though there is an internal Nepali political dimension too. In any case, in Nepal's politics, bragging rights are transitory, with rent-seeking remaining the dominant trait.

India is by far Nepal's largest trade and economic partner and a gateway to economic buoyancy in the country. It is also the only meaningful pathway for Nepal to harness benefits from its growing hydel power production. Recent years have seen a boost to connectivity with the construction of integrated check-posts, development of railway connectivity, power transmission lines and the go-ahead to UPI transactions. Indeed, many of these projects, including a pipeline to deliver oil to Nepal and the construction of the 900-MW Arun III project, started when Oli was Prime Minister in 2018-19.

In Nepal, where playing the India card sways popular sentiment, the economy matters critically, and an unhealthy economic state cannot bode well for any incumbent Prime Minister. A continued push for improving the ease of doing business would serve the interests of both India and Nepal.

Views are personal

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Coalitions, though successful, have always found this, that their triumph has been brief. — Benjamin Disraeli

## The hilarious spirit of Bombay

SUMIT PAUL

A few years ago, I received an email from a Bombay-based Parsi friend, titled 'Eighty-four things not to do in Bombay'. A person who is new to Bombay (Mumbai) must follow the advice in toto. Newcomers to the city must never call a cop *Pandu*, a BEST bus driver *Bablia* or a Maharashtra guy *Bhaiya*. Bombay has its peculiar lingo, an odd mixture of words from Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Parsi and a dash of other tongues.

In terms of language, Bombay is truly cosmopolitan, and no other city in India can hold a candle to it on this count. Where else will one hear 'cutting' *chai* (for half a glass of tea), *kalti marna* (get out), *bhidu* (a term of endearment for a friend), *gayela*, *khayela*, *khaali-peeli* (unnecessarily), *jhakaas* (terrific), *bhankas* (useless) and so on, popularised by Sanjay Dutt and Arshad Warsi in *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.*?

Once, I was passing through Bhendi Bazaar. I stopped at a shop to pick up old Urdu magazines. Accustomed to saying and hearing *aap* and *janaab* throughout my life, when I began to bargain, the shopkeeper told me: '*Bhai sahab, tum ko bolela hai, ekach keemat* (I've told you, the price is fixed).' It was a bolt from the blue. I almost fainted; I forgot to buy the books from that man and fled, lest I might die of hearing a few more gems of linguistic distortion, or rather, innovation.

*Nikal patli gali se, hawa aane de, kidhar ku jayenga, woh sochela hai* — these are some of the expressions that can rattle the sensibilities of a newcomer to the city. You won't know that the *Sandaas* (toilet) Road railway station on the harbour line is actually called Sandhurst. People have forgotten Baron Sandhurst and relegated him to the loo. I haven't come across a better example of falling from grace.

Sandhurst (UK) is renowned for the Royal Military Academy. Once, a Sandhurst-passed Indian General wrote in *The Illustrated Weekly*, requesting the Bombay Municipal Authority to change the name of the road. He found it terribly insulting to his alma mater!

And you can get an instant 'university degree' in abuse if you inadvertently get on the nerves of a Koli woman (fisherwoman) on a suburban train. Truck drivers can come to Bombay for a crash course in the choicest cuss words from Koli women. The abuses can sound the death knell for ultra-sensitive souls. I used to get quite worked up when somebody called me *tu* or *tum*. But the spirit of Bombay is so overwhelming that soon you get used to its linguistic excesses and start talking a la Bombaite. Bombay has always witnessed the juxtaposition of rusticity and refinement. Don't forget that Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Kaifi Azmi and Shakeel Badayuni wrote their finest poetry in this megalopolis.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Lack of level playing field

Refer to 'Poll bugle sounded'; far from viewing the General Election as a festival of democracy, many voters now have apprehensions about the poll process. The disclosure of the electoral bond data and the arrest or targeting of many Opposition leaders have added to the voters' fear of a lack of a level playing field, which is a prerequisite for democracy. All this gives weight to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's claim that PM Narendra Modi cannot win an election without EVMS, the ED, the CBI and the Income Tax Department. It will further erode public faith in elections. The onus is on the ruling dispensation and the Opposition to ensure that the masses' faith in democracy and its institutions does not wane.

HIRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

## Hold those in power accountable

Apropos of the editorial 'Poll bugle sounded'; elections provide the voters with a golden opportunity to punish power-drunk politicians. The Lok Sabha polls will be a chance for the voters to hold the ruling dispensation to account for undermining democracy by misusing government machinery to target the Opposition. There is a need for all voters to keep issues like social inequality in mind while casting their votes. The widespread circulation of black money, rampant corruption and the unholy nexus between those in power and the corporate giants must weigh heavily on a voter's mind.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, BY MAIL

## Integrity of polls under a cloud

With reference to 'Poll bugle sounded'; some recent incidents and revelations have sown fear in the minds of the voters. The electorate is concerned about the possible manipulation of EVMS and a lack of transparency in electoral funding. The delay by the State Bank of India in furnishing complete details of electoral bonds despite the directions of the Supreme Court hints at the possibility of manipulation of the data. The fact that so many firms that had purchased electoral bonds were under the scanner of agencies like the Enforcement Directorate (ED) raises ques-

tions about the extortion of crores of rupees in the name of political donations.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

## A mockery of the law

Apropos of the report 'Day after bail, Kejri gets summons in two cases'; the ED and Arvind Kejriwal are both making a mockery of the law. The fact that the ED issued two fresh summonses to the Delhi CM just a day after a local court granted him bail shows that the probe agency is out to get him. It is a sad reflection on the working of the agency. ED officials must not be so quick to issue a summons to any citizen. Further, the AAP national convener has shown disrespect to the law of the land by skipping one summons after another.

FAQIR SINGH, DASUYA

## CAA rights a wrong

Refer to the editorial 'US criticism of CAA'; America's criticism of the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is unwarranted. Washington lacks a basic understanding of the history of India. Those in power in the US need to delve into the background of the legislation. The law has been brought in to address some issues that arose during the Partition. The world needs to stop acting like no other country has granted citizenship to a migrant or refugee on the basis of his or her faith or ethnicity. Further, the CAA is an internal matter of India, and other nations should respect that.

SIKANDAR BANSAL, SHIMLA

## Remove hoardings of politicians

It is heartening to know that with the model code of conduct kicking in, the photos of Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann, which have been brazenly displayed on government buildings, are being removed. The photo of a politician should not be put up in public places or government buildings in the first place. The installation of Mann's photos at Aam Aadmi Clinics across the state was a waste of the taxpayers' money. Desperate to take credit for the success of every government scheme or policy, the parties in power tend to have promotional hoardings put up in public places. This practice must be checked.

AMIT KUMAR, MOHALI