

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Iran after Raisi

India hopeful of maintaining strong ties

THE death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (63), a hardliner who was perceived to be a strong contender to succeed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has brought to an abrupt end an eventful tenure marked by a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests, besides frantic but futile efforts to revitalise Iran's economy in the face of Western sanctions. Even though Khamenei has the final say on foreign policy and Iran's nuclear programme, age is not on his side. At 85, he direly needs younger leaders to stabilise the Iranian ship. Raisi's death comes weeks after Iran and Israel were involved in a direct confrontation with a tit-for-tat exchange of drone and missile strikes. Iran has also been in the crosshairs of Israel over its support to Hamas, whose October 7 attack prompted a fierce Israeli retaliation that has ravaged Gaza.

Even as Khamenei has tried to reassure Iranians that there would be no disruption to state affairs and has named First Vice-President Mohammad Mokhber as the interim President, the potential power struggle within Iran will be keenly watched by the West and other stakeholders, including India. It was only last week that New Delhi and Tehran signed a 10-year contract for the operation of the strategic Iranian port of Chabahar, which was regarded as one of Raisi's pet projects. Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the Chabahar pact as an important milestone that would facilitate trade connectivity to the landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asian region. Even the threat of American sanctions has not deterred India from strengthening its bonds with Iran.

Raisi had developed a close rapport with PM Modi, whose help he had sought to expedite the process of admitting Iran to the BRICS bloc; eventually, it did enter the grouping that originally included Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. India will hope to forge a similar relationship with Raisi's successor.

Spice crisis

Contamination hits India's global market

THE recent ban on Indian spices, imposed by Singapore, Hong Kong, Maldives, Australia, and Nepal due to alleged contamination of ethylene oxide (ETO) in products of popular brands MDH and Everest, could potentially reduce spice exports by up to 40 per cent, as warned by the Federation of Indian Spice Stakeholders. The presence of ETO, a toxic chemical, beyond permissible limits in spice mixes poses severe health risks, including cancer. This alarming development underscores the urgent need for India to enhance its food safety protocols and restore global confidence in its spice exports.

India's pre-eminence as the world's largest producer, consumer and exporter of spices is at stake. The country exports over \$4 billion worth of spices annually, and its domestic market is valued at \$10 billion. Yet, recurring quality concerns have dented this reputation, jeopardising a sector that significantly contributes to the economy. In 2014, lead was found in the food colouring used in spices like chili and curry powder. The US FDA has rejected 14.5 per cent of MDH spice shipments since 2021 due to bacterial contamination. Last month, authorities in Gujarat seized over 60,000 kg of adulterated spices.

Considering the serious health risks, it cannot be business as usual in the spice industry. The Indian government has responded with stricter quality controls, expanding inspections across manufacturing units. However, these steps must translate into tangible results and mitigation of further damage, for food quality affects everybody. People need reassurance that the spices they consume are safe. Nobody can be allowed to play with their health. Surprisingly, the government has failed to send out a message to consumers that the companies at fault are being scrutinised. They are left wondering whether they should consume spices. Transparent operations and proactive communication with international regulators are essential to safeguard our spice legacy.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 1924

The Indian labour class

THE debate that took place in the House of Commons on the 14th instant on the condition of the labouring classes in India was evidently intended to show the sympathy of the British Labour Party with its "comrades" in India. Now that the party has been in power in England, it took this opportunity, through a private member, to do something to improve the economic condition of the labourers in India, whose great poverty and low wages were graphically described. Mr. TW Grundy moved a resolution declaring that the "conditions and wages of Labour in India are so serious as to call for such changes in the Indian constitution as to secure votes for and representation of the workers and peasants of India in both the Assembly and the Legislative Council." Unfortunately, neither the mover nor his supporters possessed the necessary knowledge of labour problems in India which could have enabled them to press the Government to give effect to their good intentions. Perhaps it did not occur to them as very odd that the people of Great Britain should at all attempt to solve such a complicated problem affecting the people of a country very different from their own and situated six thousand miles away from them. The most effective remedy they could have suggested was to give powers of self-determination to India at once so that their "comrades" in this country might be free to adopt methods suited to them to improve their moral and material condition. Instead of suggesting this natural course, they obviously assumed, like others, that it was their duty and their right to solve every problem relating to India without studying the real facts of the case.

Iran's internal political balance at stake

Supreme Leader and advisers set to keep foreign policy operational after Raisi's death



KC SINGH
FORMER AMBASSADOR TO IRAN
AND EX-SECRETARY, MEA

IRANIAN President Ebrahim Raisi's tragic death is untimely for Iran as it confronts Israel, and by proxy the US, in the wake of the October 7 massacre by the Hamas in Israeli settlements.

Iran is allegedly the Hamas' financier, arms supplier and abettor. Other Iran-aligned armed groups in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, especially Hezbollah, are seen as complicit. Iran launched its first-ever direct missile and drone attack on Israel on April 13. The provocation was the Israeli bombing of an Iranian diplomatic complex in Damascus that killed some Iranian military commanders who were coordinating Iran's clandestine activities in West Asia.

During the Barack Obama presidency, the US opted for engaging with Iran to control its nuclear programme and strategic reach over the Shia crescent, running from Iran via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. The 2015 nuclear deal was struck between Iran and P5+1, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany. However, then President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018, imposing sanctions instead. Simultaneously, he worsened America's pro-Israel tilt, shifting the US embassy to Jerusalem without obtaining Israeli commitment to curb settlements in the occupied West Bank or a two-state solution.

President Joe Biden tried to recalibrate this policy, but was first distracted by the Covid-19 pandemic and then the Ukraine war. Meanwhile, the US envisioned a new West Asia and Gulf security paradigm, utilising the Abraham



TRAGIC END: Ebrahim Raisi was being talked about as the Supreme Leader's successor. REUTERS

Accords signed during the Trump presidency. Pro-US Arab nations like the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Saudi Arabia were encouraged to normalise relations with Israel. The aim was to contain Iran and its deep political linkages in West Asia. But the danger posed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new coalition government, with extreme right-wing parties advocating Palestinian marginalisation, was ignored. Netanyahu argued that Palestinians had ceased to matter in regional geopolitics.

Based on this new vision, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was proposed. The leaders of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, US and India met on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi for its high-profile launch. But the Israeli PM, in whose country the Adani-owned Haifa port was the land route's termination point, was absent. Clearly, the Saudis had resisted signing the Abraham Accords without Israeli commitment to resolve the Palestinian issue.

Less than a year later, the Iran-provoked Gaza crisis has upended the IMEC project. Even signatories to the Abraham Accords like the UAE and Bahrain are compelled to toughen their public posture against Israel to satisfy domestic public opinion and

With Afghanistan under Taliban rule and Iran goading its proxies to fight Israel, the Americans may be less willing than in the past to exempt India from sanctions.

the Arab Street's ire.

Having sabotaged the US-Israeli plans, Iran has moved closer to the Russia-China combine. This convergence challenges America's global hegemony and the existing global order. Iran has become a major supplier of armed drones to Russia, threatening to make tanks and artillery redundant. The recent visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to China, his first foray abroad after winning a fresh six-year term, underscores the new geopolitical realignment.

Raisi was in the third year of his four-year term. As a former head of the Iranian judiciary, a position with more authority than chief justices in democratic nations, he had a blood-tainted past. He oversaw the mass execution of politi-

cal prisoners in the 1980s. His election in 2021 was less free than usual Iranian presidential elections. Traditionally, the Supreme Leader and his advisers use the Guardian Council to prune the list of candidates. In the past, this was done shrewdly to provide the people some sense of choice and electoral freedom. When Mohammad Khatami was elected in 1997, he was an acknowledged reformist who beat the regime-favoured conservatives. This was abandoned in 2021 amid rising public disenchantment due to economic distress caused by Western sanctions. Later, young Mahsa Amini's death in police custody in September 2022 ignited widespread protests, especially by women. With the regime's moral authority damaged, the 2021 voting percentage dropped to 49 per cent from 60 per cent or above earlier. In fact, voters protested by casting damaged votes, numbering 13 per cent of the total. This was higher even than the votes received by Raisi's opponents.

Raisi was being talked about as the current Supreme Leader's successor, who is old and a cancer survivor. A new presidential election must now be held in 50 days. The challenge is to select a conservative who is young, trusted by the Supreme Leader and loyal to the regime's core reli-

gious conservatism.

How does this impact India-Iran relations? Both nations value strategic independence but have compulsions limiting their legroom. India cannot provoke the US excessively by its dalliance with nations like Iran, which are challenging US dominance in the Gulf and West Asia. Iran needs China as a market for its oil and a supplier of dual-use products for its defence and nuclear programmes. It also needs Russia to balance dependence on China and as an export market for its defence products, at least till the Ukraine war continues. India-Iran trade last year was \$1.39 billion, falling from a high of \$3.38 billion in 2019-20. The reduction in oil imports and the Chinese dominance of the Iranian domestic market were contributory factors.

The Chabahar port has been the talisman of bilateral relations. After the recent 10-year deal to develop the port, the US issued a warning of imminent sanctions. With Afghanistan under Taliban rule and Iran goading its proxies to fight Israel, the Americans may be less willing than in the past to exempt India.

The Indo-Iranian strategic convergence was the closest during 1996-2001, when the Taliban controlled Afghanistan. Both backed the Northern Alliance of Ahmad Shah Massoud. But since 2003, when the Iranian clandestine nuclear programme was revealed and US as well as Western sanctions followed, India began negotiating a nuclear deal with the US. Since then, relations between the two have fluctuated between strategic suspicion and transactional forbearance.

Raisi's death will not alter these fundamental factors. In any case, the Supreme Leader and the advisers in the Supreme National Security Council, especially its secretary general Ali Akbar Ahmadian, will keep foreign policy operational. But his death could affect Iran's internal political balance as jockeying begins to fill the power vacuum.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

If you disagree with your government that is approaching theocracy, then you're evil. —Margaret Atwood

High drama on a Delhi flyover

SHAMSHER CHANDEL

IT was a bustling summer of 2004, and Delhi was like a huge circus on wheels with traffic snarls everywhere, thanks to the construction of the Delhi Metro. On one such occasion, I was driving from Batra Hospital to RK Puram. Right at the Chirag Dilli flyover, two cars were involved in a minor accident, or rather a side-swipe.

The driver of the damaged car immediately stepped out, using expletives and frowning at the owner of the other car. 'Don't you have eyes? See what you have done to my brand-new car!'

Traffic screeched to a halt and horns started blaring. And things escalated into a full-blown you-don't-know-who-I-am kind of verbal duel.

In a bid to restore sanity, a traffic cop approached the distraught car owner: 'Brother, it's just a small scratch! Why make such a fuss?'

The car owner responded: 'It looks small, but the bumper has come out. The repair is at least worth Rs 1,000.'

The other man, the so-called offender, said: 'Brother, this must be your first car. It will not cost you more than Rs 50. If you want money, just sit by the roadside and start begging.'

The 'victim' went a step closer, as if trying to scare the other man: 'What did you say? You called me a beggar?'

'No, I didn't. But you are behaving like one.'

After about 10 minutes of drama, a middle-aged, suave Punjabi passerby made an intervention, uttering part Punjabi and part English. His *firangi* accent stood out: 'I have a flight to catch in another hour. Can you leave this fuss and be a bit wise?'

'Tell him to cough up Rs 1,000 and I will leave,' the owner of the damaged car said.

Frustrated, the passerby asked: 'How much will it cost you to fix your car?'

'Around Rs 1,000,' the man replied.

Just then, another fellow arrived on the scene, addressing the irate passerby and pointing at the 'victim': 'This guy is shameful. He will stay here forever. Let's pool money and pay him. I am getting late for a party.'

The Punjabi passerby sprang into action and took out a crisp Rs 500 note. Others followed suit, frantically rummaging through their pockets until Rs 1,000 was collected. The passerby put Rs 1,000 into the hand of the 'victim', who sheepishly did a vanishing act.

As the traffic finally began to move at a snail's pace, a beggar with a wide grin came with folded hands and stopped right in front of the passerby. The latter wasted no time in pressing a Rs 100 note into the beggar's hands and smiled: 'You know, sometimes beggars drive cars, and kings like you live on the streets.'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ensure safety of Valley residents

Apropos of the editorial 'Terror attacks in Valley'; the recent attack on a tourist couple in Kashmir amid the fervour of elections is a stark reminder of the challenges that persist in the region. The incident not only shatters the semblance of normalcy but also raises questions about the effectiveness of the security measures. As India strides towards the final phases of its electoral marathon, such acts of violence undermine the democratic spirit. It is imperative that the authorities concerned reassess their approach to ensure the safety of both locals and visitors. The courage shown by voters in Srinagar, who turned out in significant numbers, must be matched by the authorities' resolve to protect them and uphold the values of our republic.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, BY MAIL

A distraction from real issues

With reference to the editorial 'Phase V poll'; with every phase, the campaigning is touching a new low. Electioneering must not end up dividing the masses on the basis of their caste or background. Politics is sadly diverting the attention of the public from real issues like the unavailability of quality or affordable education and healthcare facilities, unemployment, inflation, corruption and a lack of access to basic amenities. And the constant media coverage of a toxic election cycle makes it even worse.

HL SHARMA, AMRITSAR

Modi's Hindu-Muslim politics

Refer to the article 'Hindu-Muslim binary looms large'; we can't go along with PM Narendra Modi's assertion that he would not be fit for public life if he starts doing Hindu-Muslim politics. He has explicitly spewed venom against Muslims in speech after speech. He has caused polarisation in society for the sake of deriving political mileage out of it by painting the Opposition as pro-minority and anti-Hindu. In his campaign speeches, he pours scorn on Muslims to woo Hindu voters. The Citizenship Amendment Act is a political ploy to demonstrate that he is pro-Hindu. Modi's claim that the Congress would have the Ram Temple razed if elected reeks of his divisive style of politics.

ROSHAN LAL GOEL, LADWA

Bogey of minority persecution

Refer to the article 'Use the power of the ballot to bail out democracy'; the author has regurgitated the oft-repeated claims of democracy being in danger, rising majoritarianism and autocracy and the bogey of minority persecution to target the ruling BJP. All that the Opposition offers is crass casteism by kleptocratic dynasties. Leftist intellectuals, with their ossified thinking, refuse to accept that the Indian electorate chose to give two successive terms to the Modi government. To the discomfort of those with visceral hatred for Modi, a third term for his government is more than likely. Contrary to what the writer believes, Modi is a popular PM not because of his charismatic personality but because of a decade of clean governance and a uniform implementation of poverty alleviation programmes.

AJAY TYAGI, MUMBAI

Leave no voter behind

With reference to the report 'Home comfort for stalwarts'; the initiative of the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide the home voting facility to elderly voters and persons with disabilities contributes to the strengthening of the Indian democracy by making the electoral process a success. It is encouraging to know that former Vice-President Mohammad Hamid Ansari, ex-PM Dr Manmohan Singh, former Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani and erstwhile Union Minister Muri Manohar Joshi cast their votes using the home voting facility. It shows their commitment to taking part in democracy. The ECI's initiative would encourage more people to vote in the polls.

JAGVINDER SINGH BRAR, PATIALA

Heatwave shouldn't hit polling

With a severe heatwave gripping north India amid the General Election, it is important that the authorities concerned take steps to make sure that the rising temperature does not adversely affect the voter turnout. The scorching heat may prompt voters to stay home, discouraging them from exercising their franchise. All poll booths must have proper arrangements for drinking water. Ensuring a shade at the polling station is also important to give the voters some relief from the unbearable heat. More and more people should be encouraged to cast their votes.

KRISHAN KANT SOOD, NANGAL

Make data public to allay vaccine fears



KK TALWAR
FORMER DIRECTOR,
PGI, CHANDIGARH

A STRAZENECA (AZ) has stated that its Covid-19 vaccine, Covishield or Vaxzevria, may induce thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) in rare cases, resulting in neurological, cardiac, pulmonary and systemic organ complications related to clot formation in veins and arteries. Serious complications like a brain stroke and heart attack may occur. But the incidence of such complications is extremely low. According to the Melbourne Vaccine Education Centre, the risk of such serious complications is 2.6 per one lakh vaccinated (0.0026 per cent) individuals. Most cases occur within the first four weeks of vaccination. Beyond this, the chances of clot formation are almost nil.

AZ's admission has created widespread concern among the public. The company's subsequent withdrawal of

the vaccine only served to exacerbate this concern, despite the firm claiming that the decision was due to 'surplus availability'.

This data is not, in fact, new. The first dose of the Oxford-AZ vaccine outside of a clinical trial was given on January 2, 2021. The first incidence of clot formation was reported in February 2021. At the time, the global Covid-19 burden was colossal, with almost 4 million cases being reported every week. Hence, the WHO and the European Medicines Agency highlighted how the benefits of the vaccine far outweighed potential risks. Over the course of the year, around 2.5 billion doses were administered, with health authorities estimating that the vaccine saved approximately 6.3 million lives. In April 2021, the Delta variant wreaked havoc in India. Covishield was one of the few aids healthcare workers possessed to help them combat the health crisis.

One might reasonably ask, then, why the issue of TTS is being highlighted only now. In cases of mass panic, invariably, social media and the press play a role. Most of the Indian population has been vaccinated with Covishield. As a consequence, people



COVID BATTLE: Vaccines were the only tools for combating the spread of the virus because of the absence of effective antiviral drugs. ISTOCK

have now begun fearing for their health and safety. Recently, during a car journey, my driver said he had heard that the Covid jab has serious side effects and that he was apprehensive as he had taken two doses of the vaccine. I reassured him with the information that I myself had taken three! Indeed, there is almost no reason to worry at this stage. In this situation, it is of paramount importance to lay scientific data before the public to help allay their fears and pro-

Most Indians were given Covishield. AstraZeneca's admission about side effects has made them fear for their health.

tect them from misinformation spread by anti-vaccine lobbyists. What we should also realise is that clot formation is far more common in patients suffering from Covid than in people who have received the AZ vaccine.

In the early days of the pandemic, even developed countries like the UK, Italy and the US faced the prospect of their health systems crumbling because of the sudden surge in hospitalisations and mortality. The horrors of the lockdown have left an indelible mark

on our collective memory. The gravity and urgency of the situation forced governments, companies and research institutes to develop vaccines with groundbreaking speed and efficiency.

Vaccine development, which earlier took at least 10-15 years, was accomplished in a matter of months. This is undeniably a remarkable achievement of science.

The mRNA vaccine from Pfizer BioNTech was approved in the UK (in December 2020). Soon, other countries approved a few other vaccines on the mRNA platform for emergency use, and then adenovirus vector-based Vaxzevria (of Oxford-AZ) was also approved. The Pune-based Serum Institute of India produced the Oxford-AZ vaccine and named it Covishield. This was also approved in India for emergency use and mentioned by the WHO in its emergency use list. At almost the same time, indigenous vaccines were produced in China and Russia, and India soon followed with its own indigenous vaccine, Covaxin, developed by Bharat Biotech.

The use of these vaccines in large populations globally did show the relative safety of these vaccines. In India alone, nearly 170 crore doses of Covishield

were administered (90 per cent of the vaccinated people received it). These vaccines were the only tools for combating the spread of the virus because of the absence of effective antiviral drugs. The large-scale use and success of these vaccines globally is a testament to their safety and efficacy.

The mRNA vaccines (from Pfizer BioNTech and Moderna) were not used in the country because of the cost and technical issues, namely storage and transportation. In September 2023, the US FDA amended the emergency use of the Pfizer BioNTech Covid vaccine to include the 2023-24 formula as regular approval. The initial concern of specialised refrigeration for the transport and storage of these vaccines has also been overcome with new formulations. Moreover, mRNA vaccines are also easier to update when new variants emerge.

The withdrawal of the AZ vaccine is not linked to its TTS complications, which are extremely rare. The company, which is facing a lawsuit in the UK, has apparently withdrawn it as the Covid pandemic has subsided and because updated, better mRNA vaccines are available. The Covid vaccine story deserves its due credit for handling a serious health crisis.

Reservation policy held hostage to political rhetoric



KP SINGH
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

RESERVATION has emerged as a key electioneering issue in this General Election. The debate revolves mainly around the quota for Muslims, even as the principal opposition party, the Congress, is claiming that the ruling dispensation would do away with the reservation policy if it retains power. Political rhetoric apart, reservation is and would remain for long the main plank of a sovereign guarantee for the inclusion of the groups which have historically suffered isolation and discrimination for socio-economic and cultural reasons.

Provisions relating to reservation are mentioned at four places in the Constitution. Articles 330 to 335 provide for reservation to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the legislature, representation to the Anglo-Indian community in the House of the People by nomination and claims of SCs and STs in government services. Articles 15(3), 15(4) and 15(5) provide for special provisions for women and children and reservation for SCs, STs and

socially and educationally backward classes in educational institutions, including private and excluding minority educational institutions. Article 15(6) was later added by way of the 103rd Constitutional Amendment Act, 2019, to provide reservation in educational institutions for economically weaker sections.

Articles 16(4), 16(4A) and 16(4B) contain provisions relating to reservation in government jobs for people of any backward class, not adequately represented in appointments and posts. Article 16(5) was added in 2019 to give reservation to economically backward citizens in appointments to government services. Articles 243D and 243T provide reservation of seats for SCs and STs in panchayats and municipalities.

Job reservation and political reservation to the members of SCs in the Lok Sabha and in the legislative assemblies of states may be traced to the provisions of the Government of India Act 1935 in the backdrop of untouchability and denial of civil rights to them; through the guarantee of representation in the legislature and the executive, the framers of the Constitution have aimed to mitigate the negative consequences of social seclusion of these groups and strengthen inclusive character of Indian polity and governance.

Since untouchability is a social evil specific to Hin-



RIGHT WAY: There is a case to implement the reservation policy in the spirit of constitutionalism. PTI

du religion, the Muslim did not find mention in the list of SCs. Even the British refused to include underprivileged Christians in the list of SCs in 1936. Additionally, the geo-spatial isolation and cultural barriers suffered by the STs justified positive discrimination in their favour in order to rehabilitate them in the main stream national life; reservation for them is mainly borne out of the cultural context, irrespective of religion.

The philosophy of 'affirmative action' finds its application in Articles 331 & 333, wherein it is provided that up to two members from the Anglo-Indian community may be nominated to the Lok Sabha to ensure their adequate representation; this was to ensure that they did

The reservation policy subscribes to the philosophy of 'affirmative action' to guarantee inclusive growth for all, especially the underprivileged.

not remain unrepresented in the legislative body.

Initially, constitutional scheme provided reservation only for the SCs and STs; reservation for backward classes came into focus after the Supreme Court (SC) in *State of Madras vs Smt Champakam Dorairajan* (1951) noticed that Article 16(4) provides reservations in services to any backward class of citizens not adequately represented, whereas, no such enabling provision is available in Article 15; this led to the First Constitutional Amendment, whereby Article 15(4) was added to provide reservation for socially and educationally backward classes in educational institutions. Subsequently, the Kaka Kalelkar

Commission was appointed in 1953 to investigate conditions of the backward classes; the Second Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1979 under the chairmanship of BP Mandal.

The Mandal Commission developed 11 indicators of social, educational, and economic backwardness and recommended 27 per cent job reservation for them; in absence of credible data to determine backwardness, caste became the easiest choice to tag backwardness; the commission paved the way for reservation in the OBC category even for the Muslims and other non-Hindus, if they belonged to 'untouchable' Hindu castes before their conversion to a non-Hindu religion, or if they continued with their pre-conversion trade and occupation after conversion. Several states have given reservation to Muslims under the OBC category since the Central Government accepted the Mandal recommendations in 1990.

The constitutional scheme of reservation has come under the apex court's scrutiny on a number of occasions. In *Indra Sawhney vs Union of India* (1992), the SC held that the creamy layer of OBCs should be excluded from the list of beneficiaries; there should be no reservation in promotions and the total reserved

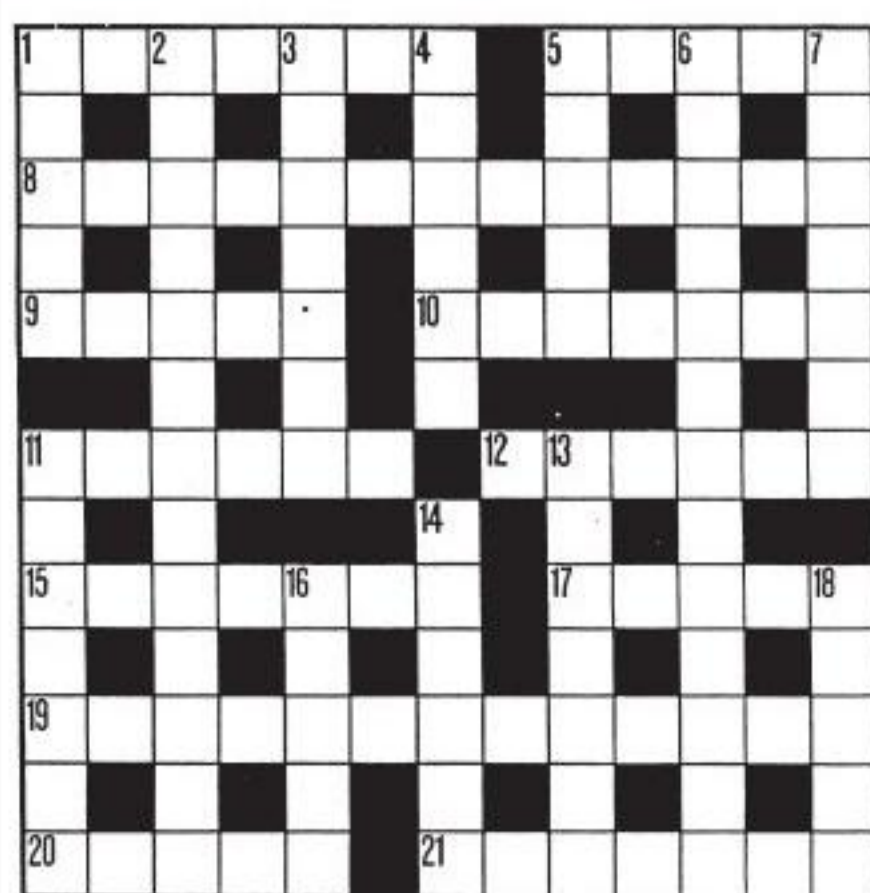
quota should not exceed 50 per cent. However, Parliament passed the 77th Constitutional Amendment to restore reservation in promotions.

In the Ashok Thakur case (2007), the SC stated that the government must set reservation thresholds to ensure that quality and merit do not suffer and recommended review of backwardness every 10 years. In *Suraj Bhan Meena vs State of Rajasthan* (2011), the apex court observed that without quantifiable data of backwardness and underrepresentation, government rules for reservation cannot be introduced.

Inclusion implies exclusion. The reservation policy was established in the Constitution as a temporary measure to ensure justice and inclusion in the mainstream life of those who were left behind because historical reasons; accordingly, periodic review of the policy was inbuilt in the constitutional scheme to exclude those who benefited from the policy in order to make way for other deserving ones; it has not happened so far due to vote-bank politics.

The reservation policy subscribes to the philosophy of 'affirmative action' to guarantee inclusive growth for all, especially the underprivileged ones; there is a case to implement the policy in the spirit of constitutionalism and not to serve political interests.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Supplement to a will (7)
- 5 Yellow-flowered shrub (5)
- 8 Incalculably small (13)
- 9 Body of troops (5)
- 10 Seek (4,3)
- 11 Lone (6)
- 12 Socially awkward (6)
- 15 Utterly wicked (7)
- 17 A hidden difficulty (5)
- 19 Great in number (13)
- 20 An artificial fibre (5)
- 21 Probity (7)

DOWN

- 1 Steep rock-face (5)
- 2 With due respect (13)
- 3 Solidify (7)
- 4 Relatively unimportant (6)
- 5 Enjoyment (5)
- 6 Complex developments (13)
- 7 Amplify (7)
- 11 Plotter (7)
- 13 Sale by bidding (7)
- 14 Being of that kind (2,4)
- 16 A bulbous vegetable (5)
- 18 An Arctic working dog (5)

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Pause, 8 Carefree, 9 Freak, 10 Business, 11 Bison, 12 Lip, 16 Thief, 17 Ocular, 18 Top, 23 Agree, 24 Allocate, 25 Bleak, 26 Partisan, 27 Awake.

Down: 2 Airtight, 3 Seasoned, 4 Saluki, 5 Denim, 6 Cruet, 7 Sense, 12 Let, 13 Pop, 14 Bungalow, 15 Cakewalk, 19 Outlaw, 20 Happy, 21 Glare, 22 Acid.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MAY 21ST 2024, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Vaishakh Shaka 31
- Jyeshtha Pavishte 8
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 13, up to 5.40 pm
- Vyatapata Yoga up to 12.35 pm
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 5.46 am
- Moon in Libra sign

FORECAST

| CITY | TUESDAY WEDNESDAY | | 19:12 HRS 05:26 HRS |
|------------|----------------------|-----|------------------------|
| | MAX | MIN | |
| Chandigarh | 44 | 28 | |
| New Delhi | 45 | 29 | |
| Amritsar | 44 | 27 | |
| Bathinda | 44 | 27 | |
| Jalandhar | 44 | 27 | |
| Ludhiana | 45 | 28 | |
| Bhivani | 45 | 31 | |
| Hisar | 45 | 28 | |
| Sirsa | 45 | 31 | |
| Dharamsala | 36 | 24 | |
| Manali | 28 | 12 | |
| Shimla | 29 | 20 | |
| Srinagar | 29 | 13 | |
| Jammu | 42 | 25 | |
| Kargil | 24 | 10 | |
| Leh | 20 | 08 | |
| Dehradun | 39 | 25 | |
| Mussoorie | 26 | 18 | |

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Taking states along

Next govt should build consensus on reforms

In a recent interview, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was asked what reforms were required to increase interest globally about investing in India. In response, the Prime Minister pointed out it was not merely the Government of India that needed to work to attract investment; both state and local governments needed a similar approach to investment-friendly policy and regulation. Without cooperation from state governments on land availability and on regulatory action from local governments, investors would continue to struggle. If, when it came to ease of doing business, the Union government received support from the states, argued Mr Modi, there would be no need for any investor to look elsewhere other than India.

Mr Modi, who was, after all, once chief minister himself, cannot be faulted on his analysis of the problem. His administration's experience in office also reveals the importance of taking states along when it comes to major economic reform. Tax reform, namely the introduction of goods and services tax, was accomplished when consensus was achieved with state governments. But both land and labour reform, which are central to increasing investor interest and market efficiency in India, has stalled because of significant opposition, not least among state governments. The four proposed labour codes that consolidate existing central labour laws cannot be properly rolled out, for example, until all states pre-publish draft rules under those codes. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, also in a recent interview, stated the next target for reforms in India would have to be at the level of local governance, given that panchayats and urban local bodies controlled a lot of regulatory activity as well as land. Both Mr Modi and Ms Sitharaman stressed that competitive energy had built up among many states, and the desire to attract investment was universal.

There is, however, a great deal more that the Union government can and should do to build a consensus. Mr Modi has spoken occasionally of the level of cooperation between the state and Union governments visible during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. What should be recognised, however, is that cooperation came about because of frequent meetings between the Prime Minister and chief ministers. The institutionalisation of Union-state interaction is essential if a common approach to reform is to be constructed. In the past, the Planning Commission played part of that role. Its successor, the NITI Aayog, needs to take more measures to replicate that effort. The Inter-State Council, a constitutional body that last met in 2017, also needs more frequent interactions.

More communication between the political leadership of states and the Union government is essential, ideally with minimal politicisation and a focus on common-policy priorities such as welfare delivery and investment. This would also help check the increasing pressures on Indian federalism, which come from multiple avenues — whether contrasting approaches to law or fiscal policy — and which, if ignored, could cause destabilising sub-nationalism to take hold. But it would also be necessary that the government in New Delhi respect the political desires, aspirations, and requirements of state leaders, some of whom will naturally be from Opposition parties. This understanding has been somewhat lacking in recent years, and needs to be built again.

The heat is on

Substantive, practical adaptation policies can help

A large part of the country is grappling with heatwaves. The consequent threat to public health and productivity can be severe. Almost 75 per cent of India's workforce depends on heat-exposed labour in agriculture and construction, a World Bank study said, and reckoned that India might account for almost 43 per cent of global job losses from heat stress-associated productivity declines by 2030. The government data shows the spread and incidence of heatwaves are also rising — from nine states in 2009 to 23 states in 2020 (and this when the pandemic lockdown had stalled economic activity). In the same period, the number of average heatwave days has risen sharply, from 74 to 32.2. The encouraging news is that the Centre and state governments have taken cognizance of the problem and acted with some urgency. Since 2016, for instance, after heatwave deaths exceeded 2,000, the Centre drew up national guidelines for preventing and managing heatwaves as a broad framework for states to create heatwave action plans. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) stipulated that heatwaves should be declared when the actual maximum temperature remains 45 degrees Celsius, irrespective of normal maximum temperature. Among the most useful practices have been regular heatwave warnings by the India Meteorological Department (IMD) and a standard package of Dos and Don'ts for managing them.

Employers have responded by shifting heat-exposed work to cooler nighttime hours, a transition that agricultural labour had made some time ago. The upshot has been a rapid diminution in heatwave-related deaths from 2,040 in 2015 to 27 in 2020. Though these numbers are creditworthy, the bigger challenge is to expand and institutionalise heatwave management as an ongoing imperative. Doing so will require much more than issuing heatwave warnings and advisories; substantive and practical adaptation policies at micro and macro policy levels are called for. For instance, with reservoir levels falling to 35 per cent, a water crisis is imminent, as Bengaluru demonstrated earlier this year. This calls for an urgent exercise by urban authorities to enforce water harvesting in all high rises, a mandate that appears to be observed more in the breach in water-scarce cities. At the policy level, state governments may need to bite the admittedly hard political bullet and reconfigure incentives given to water-guzzling crops such as sugarcane and rice in irrigated areas in Punjab, parts of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra in favour of water-maximising grains such as millets that also have the potential to improve public-health outcomes.

Other obvious measures would include planting more trees in public spaces as cities such as Dubai and Singapore have mandated and stipulating architectural standards that reduce the pressure on air conditioning. At the same time, white-collar work hours could also be reworked to start earlier in the day and end before day temperatures peak. With polluting coal-fired plants doing the heavy lifting as demand for electricity peaks, there is some urgency in accelerating the adoption of battery-storage technologies so that renewable sources such as wind and solar can play a more significant role in power generation. With the risk of heatwaves likely to grow exponentially in the decades to come, India, one of the epicentres of this trend, will need to adapt at a faster rate than ever.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Tweaking the inflation targeting mandate

A key focus for the new govt should be to ensure wider consultation in setting inflation target

World over, doubts are being raised about the effectiveness and even relevance of the inflation targeting mandate of central banks. Central banks have faced criticism for failing to correctly judge and predict the interest rate-inflation dynamics during the post-Covid period.

Take the Indian case. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) kept the interest rates quite low during 2020-21 and 2021-22. Inflation had conspicuously started raising its head by the middle of 2021-22, but was considered transitory by the central bank and ignored. Then, all of a sudden, in May 2022, the RBI began one of the steepest interest rate-raising cycles in recent history. The repo rate was increased from 4 per cent to 6.5 per cent by February 2023, and rates have been kept at this level since then.

For quite some time now, the markets have been speculating about when the RBI would start reducing interest rates. Many experts view the current real interest rates to be high, discouraging new investments and hurting growth. The arguments circulating suggest that the increase in repo rate has achieved its purpose, and it is time for the RBI to announce a road map for rate cuts. Some advocate that the real interest rates shouldn't be more than 1-1.5 per cent, and question whether consumer price index (CPI) is the right inflation index to target. They argue that the RBI should take the lead in reducing rates without waiting for the US Fed to do so. On the contrary, there are others who support keeping the rates high to bring the CPI below 4 per cent. Some have even raised the basic doubt of whether the central bank can actually credibly control inflation.

This column examines the need for tweaking the present inflation-targeting mechanism in India, an

issue that should be prioritised by the new government formed in June.

But before that, a few words on the current stand taken by the RBI on inflation. The RBI is right in focusing on bringing the CPI-based inflation below 4 per cent. The RBI Act, as amended in 2016, mandates the RBI to keep CPI within 4+/-2 per cent. The RBI lacks discretion to target some other inflation index. In fact, had the RBI adhered strictly to its mandate in 2021-22, the current situation of high real interest rates might have been averted. Even from a growth perspective, there are no compelling reasons for the RBI to cut rates; gross domestic product (GDP) is projected to grow by 7.6 per cent in FY24 and more than 7 per cent in FY25. As for ignoring the US Fed actions, there are limitations, given the dollar's hegemony in international trade and finance.

When it comes to the inflation targeting mechanism, to begin with, an *ab initio* look at what is being targeted would be helpful. What are the commonly used different inflation measuring indices and the purposes they serve? What is the interplay amongst these indices — are they often projecting a conflicting picture of inflation? There is a need to revisit the constituents of these indices as well as their weights.

The CPI, wholesale price index, and GDP deflator are the three indices commonly used by economists in various analyses. While they surely serve different purposes, of late, the lack of correlation in their movements has raised many eyebrows. Enough commentary is available in the public domain, debating the usefulness of these indices, besides doubting their computation methodologies. The unusually low GDP deflator during 2023-24, which pushed up the GDP



AJAY TYAGI

figures, has been a topic of discussion amongst experts. Some have argued that the GDP deflator should be taken into account by the RBI while targeting inflation.

Without going into technicalities, common sense dictates that the target inflation index for the central bank, regardless of what it is called, should be so constructed that it accurately reflects changes in consumer prices of goods and services commonly used by the general public. High prices impact the poor the most, and the aim should be to contain the type of inflation that brings hardship to them. The index's constituents should be periodically revised after conducting a credible survey, and in consultation with stakeholders.

Now, let's turn to the existing inflation target of 4+/-2 per cent. This was fixed by the government, in consultation with the RBI, in 2016 for a period of five years, and later re-adopted for another five years in 2021. What is the basis for selecting this target, including the wide band of +/-2 per cent? Considering the inflation rate-economic growth dynamics, knowing what inflation rate to target is crucial for the growth of any economy. Should achieving near-full employment or minimising the output gap in the economy be the objective, while deciding the optimal target inflation rate? The government should take a fresh look into the matter and have wider consultations while finalising the inflation target. The broad contours of the rationale, the assumptions made, and the computation methodology ought to be in the public domain.

One of the arguments put forth by the RBI for not being able to meet the inflation target during 2021-22 was that the monetary policy wasn't the right tool to contain the inflation then, which was primarily on account of supply-side disruptions. There is some merit in this argument. But then, what is the way forward in such a situation? Can the RBI be completely let off the hook?

That brings us to the issue of RBI's accountability under the law, and ensuring transparency. Section 45ZN of the RBI Act, 1934, mandates the RBI to submit a report to the government if it fails to contain average inflation below 6 per cent during the previous three quarters. The report should contain the reasons for failure to achieve the inflation target; proposed remedial actions to be taken by the Bank; and an estimate of the time-period within which the inflation target shall be achieved following timely implementation of proposed remedial actions.

The RBI did submit such a report to the government in November 2022. What does that report say and what action has been taken by the government on that report? Considering the hullabaloo about inflation, and the fact that the genesis of inflation getting out of control lies in the second half of 2021-22, it would be fair for the government to publicly disclose, in an appropriate manner, the gist of the report and the action taken thereafter.

The writer, formerly in the Indian Administrative Service and chairman of Sebi, is a distinguished fellow at the Observer Research Foundation

Infra visions in manifestos

Elections have never been won or lost solely based on voters reading manifestos! But it is a fact that think-tanks and policy cells of various political parties spend considerable time drafting their manifestos and getting them cleared by their political bosses. The recent skirmish between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress party on certain specific items in the Congress manifesto confirms that manifestos have not completely lost their relevance.

So, here are some of the key infrastructure highlights from the manifestos of the BJP, Congress, CPI(M), DMK and TMC.

It is not surprising that the railways has taken centre stage in the manifesto of the BJP, lending credence to the increasing belief that the railways is set to be of greater significance in the next five years than roads. The BJP talks of constructing 5,000-plus km of new tracks every year, expanding the Kavach safety systems, re-developing over 130-plus railway stations, and introducing rapid rail inter-city train services like Delhi-Meerut. Initiating metro rail projects in 20-plus cities is high on the agenda, as is the propagation of user-friendly super apps. The Congress party's only contribution to the railway discussion is insisting on safety and modernising outdated infrastructure. In the safety aspect, it is joined by the DMK and TMC. Rather surprisingly, both the DMK and TMC want the re-introduction of a separate Rail Budget like old times!

The BJP appears to have no fresh ideas on roads other than building 15,000 km of access-controlled highways. There is no mention of the much-anticipated GPS-based tolling system. The makings of a more investor-friendly Build Operate Transfer format also does not find mention. The Congress wants a new formula for calculating road tolls, though the specifics are left unsaid. Road safety is only alluded to in the BJP manifesto.

In terms of ports, the BJP manifesto restricts itself to doubling the share of inland water transport and the CPI(M) wants withdrawal of the Landlord Model of public sector port development. It is the

TMC manifesto that mentions the need for having coastal economic zones.

Water is clearly the next big item after railways. The manifestos of the BJP, Congress, and TMC all prioritise providing access to clean and safe drinking water. The DMK and Congress manifestos specifically mention the establishment of desalination plants in all coastal areas. The BJP and Congress manifestos focus on addressing water quality, effluent management, and river revitalisation. The CPI(M) proposes reformulating the National Water Policy to treat water as a scarce public good and emphasises protection of rivers, expansion of water bodies, and increased groundwater recharging.

In aviation, the BJP mentions expanding international airports and implementing the Amrit Kaal Civil Aviation Master Plan to upgrade airports into regional hubs. The CPI(M) advocates public-sector control over airport construction, operation, and maintenance.

Transport and logistics feature prominently in party manifestos, reflecting diverse strategies for their development. The BJP's manifesto talks about expanding the fleet of e-Buses, strengthening waterways, and urges the creation of unified metropolitan transport systems to integrate multi-modal transport facilities. The Congress manifesto supports the idea of integrated multi-modal public transport in urban areas. All this should logically lead to the implementation of a Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority (UMTA) for Indian cities, which is still awaiting real implementation after its first policy announcement in 2006. The TMC aims to expand Kolkata Metro into the suburbs. Only the BJP and DMK address electric vehicles (EVs) in their manifestos, where they primarily focus on establishing nationwide charging infrastructure and increasing subsidies for EVs.

Agricultural infrastructure emerges as a pivotal battleground for parties vying for the rural vote, with the manifestos of the BJP, Congress, DMK, CPI(M), and TMC all laying out a range of strategies. The BJP underscores integrated planning via initiatives like the Krishi Infrastructure Mission, focusing on irrigation

expansion and storage capacity. The DMK emphasises river-interlinking projects and cold storage facilities. The TMC mentions cold-chain infrastructure.

In the realm of housing infrastructure, the BJP vows to expand the PM Awas Yojana and strengthen the RERA Act. The Congress champions the Right to Homestead Act.

In the sphere of power sector policies, the BJP, TMC, and DMK all converge on promoting renewable energy. The Congress presents a Green New Deal Investment Programme, aiming to boost renewable energy adoption and generating green jobs. Notably, it proposes incentivising panchayats to establish solar grids for communal use, aligning with its focus on grassroots empowerment. The BJP vows to expand green hydrogen production, envisioning India as a hydrogen hub.

At the policy level, the BJP's manifesto emphasises the need for a robust resource mobilisation strategy, blending public and private investment across sectors like railways, airports, and digital infrastructure. The manifesto aims to attract private investment by simplifying regulations for private investment in infrastructure. The Congress also prioritises reviving public-private partnerships (PPPs) whilst expressing concern over the effectiveness of the current PPP model. If one were to commend consistency across past and current manifestos, the prize would surely go to the CPI(M) for never wavering from its espousal that all infrastructure development, maintenance, and operations should be by the public sector!

A key missing area across all the manifestos relates to the concern about urban infrastructure. Whether it is the development of Smart Cities or raising municipal bonds to fund India's booming city infrastructure requirements, the political will appears to be absent.

Overall, it must be said, with a certain amount of disappointment, that the manifestos do not have much to offer by way of inspirational programmes and ideas for India's infrastructure development. But maybe one should not expect too much from manifestos.

The writer is an infrastructure expert and founder and managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation. Research inputs were provided by Vrinda Singh

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Deconstructing India's national security system



BOOK REVIEW

SHYAM SARAN

In recent years, several books have been published on India's national security, but what makes this volume edited by Milan Vaishnav both unique and especially useful, is its comprehensive description and critical analysis of the institutional underpinnings of India's security policy. Dr Vaishnav must be complimented on assembling a group of bright and relatively young academics as contributors, who bring both rigour and acuity to their examination of a complex and often opaque subject. This is an opportune time to explore the various institutions through which the Indian state seeks to uphold the security of the country because they are inevitably being affected by the rapid and significant shifts taking place in both the domestic and

external security environment.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 looks at the Indian armed forces — the Army, Navy and Air Force, their strengths and vulnerabilities. Part 2 examines the structure and capacities of the country's premier intelligence agencies, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) for external operations and the Intelligence Bureau (IB) with a domestic remit. Neither has any legal instrument as its basis and therefore, are not subject to parliamentary or judicial oversight.

Part 3 is devoted to agencies responsible for internal and border security. They include the Assam Rifles, which is deployed in the Northeast both for guarding the border with Myanmar and China (through Arunachal Pradesh); the Rashtriya Rifles, deployed in Jammu and Kashmir for counter-insurgency and anti-terrorist operations. Assam Rifles functions under, and is financed through, the home ministry but is operationally under the Indian Army. The Rashtriya Rifles is under the defence ministry and functions under the operational control of the Indian Army. The other paramilitary formations are the Indo-Tibetan Border Force (ITBF), primarily

serving as a border guarding force on the Sino-Indian border; the Seema Suraksha Bal (SSB), which is currently deployed on the India-Nepal and India-Bhutan borders; and the Border Security Force, which guards the India-Pakistan and the India-Bangladesh borders. These are under the home ministry. The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) is the largest paramilitary force (over 330,000) available for internal security duties throughout the country in support of state police forces and for anti-insurgency operations against the Naxal and Maoist armed revolutionary movements. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), also under the home ministry, guards industrial and commercial establishments, airports and other critical infrastructure. And the National Security Guard (NSG) was set up as a commando force. While under the home ministry, it is managed operationally by the defence ministry.

Part 4 is devoted to the premier investigative agencies, the Central Bureau of Investigation, which covers criminal matters, and the National Investigation Agency (NIA), which focuses on anti-terrorism.

The book acknowledges the positive role played by the country's security system against difficult odds. But it has identified certain common challenges that confront virtually all the different security-related institutions. They suffer from lack of capacity on the one hand but have to manage overlapping and ambiguous jurisdictions on the other. They are plagued by significant and persistent vacancies at all levels. They tend to be top heavy with better trained and better paid personnel at senior levels but ill-trained and poorly treated lower ranks. A feudal culture pervades the security forces. Constables often serve as domestic staff for senior police officers and so do soldiers for higher rank military officers. The intelligence agencies operate in a legal limbo, immune from parliamentary scrutiny and public accountability. And none of the institutions are geared to stay

ahead of the technology curve.

The study is comprehensive enough but there could have been a further elaboration of the changes brought about in the wake of India becoming a declared nuclear weapon state in 1998. This led to the setting up of the National Security Council (NSC), chaired by the prime minister and including the ministers of home, external affairs, defence and finance. The newly established office of the National Security Advisor (NSA) was a major departure in the national security system. He serves as secretary to the NSC. There is no legal sanction for the office of the NSA but he has emerged as a critical and indispensable node in the security system, both domestic and external and in the nuclear domain.

The National Security Council Secretariat is now a powerful institution headed by the NSA and currently

deploys three deputy NSAs. There is a large complement of officers on deputation from other security agencies. It is both a central intelligence processing and evaluation centre as well as a policy research and analysis platform. The NSC is supported by a National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) composed of eminent but retired public officials, domain experts and academics who advise on a wide range of national security issues. The Indian nuclear doctrine in the aftermath of the nuclear tests of 1998, was drawn up by the NSAB. During the time I was chairing the NSAB, it had worked on a draft national security strategy but this could not be put in the public domain.

The book should have also looked at the institution of the Chief of Defence Services (CDS) who will play a key role in the setting up of theatre commands and in the nuclear command authority and the Strategic Forces Command, which manages India's nuclear deterrent.

This sets the agenda for a further study but Dr Vaishnav's edited volume will remain an indispensable and one of the best researched reference volumes on India's national security system.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and served as chairman, National Security Advisory Board (2013-15)

Opinion

TUESDAY, MAY 21, 2024



BANKING PROFITS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

“ In a remarkable turnaround in the last 10 years, India's banking sector net profit crosses ₹3 lakh crore (trillion) for the first time ever

Regulate cryptocurrency

With Sebi taking the lead, the government should shed its fear of the unknown

RESERVE BANK OF India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das seldom gives cryptic replies. But at the World Economic Forum in Davos earlier this year, his first response to a query on the future of cryptocurrency in India was exactly that — “very bad”. Just days after the US Securities and Exchange Commission (US SEC) approved bitcoin exchange-traded funds, the governor said, “they (the US SEC) are responsible for their nation's well-being, and we for ours.” The RBI has time and again stuck to its stand against cryptocurrencies, saying they could lead to tax evasion, decentralised peer-to-peer (P2P) activities and loss of “seigniorage” income — the profit earned by a central bank from money creation. Of course, it has also red-flagged “terrorism funding” and “money laundering” risks in the past — all risks to fiscal stability. The point the central bank has perhaps missed is that such things can happen through all asset classes.

Against this backdrop, a report suggesting that the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has recommended to a government panel that cryptocurrencies should be regulated through multiple regulators is an interesting development. It also comes at a time when Sebi chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch has been pushing for T+0 settlement in the domestic market and has said that there is a good chance that funds will move away from the regulated markets towards crypto and similar assets, if bourses don't move towards instantaneous settlement. Sebi's argument is that cross-border asset classes that operate outside regulated markets have the advantage of anonymity, tokenisation, and instantaneous settlement, and it is possible to offer the last two to investors. The market watchdog sees itself as the regulator of cryptocurrencies in the form of securities, initial coin offerings (ICOs), and also issue licences for equity market-related products — quite similar to what the US SEC does by monitoring tokens which are like securities and exchanges. It has also recommended that grievances of investors in cryptocurrencies should be resolved under India's Consumer Protection Act.

Both Sebi and RBI's arguments have their own merits. For the government, the choice is between accepting that cryptocurrencies are a reality or completely ignoring it because of the “fear of the unknown”. At present, the RBI's tough stance seems to have rubbed off on the Indian government. Its initial efforts seem to be more towards curbing the enthusiasm. It has imposed a 30% tax plus surcharge on capital gains. It also does not allow any offsetting of capital gains against losses, which is allowed for other asset classes. Then, there is a 1% TDS (tax deducted at source) on the entire sale amount, irrespective of profit or loss.

But recent numbers show that the interest is far from waning. According to reports, there are over 20 million crypto investors in India. To put these numbers in perspective, there are 22 million taxpayers in India (88 million file taxes) and around 150 demat accounts (though there will be a lot of double counting). The more interesting part is that the age of around 80% of investors is 20-35 years, and 50% have incomes less than ₹5 lakh annually. Clearly, cryptocurrencies have caught the fancy of many youngsters. It's thus clear that the government cannot afford to ignore cryptocurrencies for too long. A good start would be to let Sebi oversee the securities, exchange and ICO segments, and decide on the way forward based on this experience.

Bidenomics makes dumb EV tariffs necessary

IN ONE SENSE, President Joe Biden's punitive new tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles are indeed necessary, just as he and his officials argue. What makes them so are the enormous sums that the administration is devoting to expanding US capacity to produce its own EVs. An almost-invariable characteristic of industrial policy is to start with one dumb idea, after which many more then follow — by necessity.

America's domestic EV manufacturers are struggling despite generous subsidies. Output and sales are growing, but not as quickly as hoped. Early adopters have already adopted, and the rest of the market is less enthusiastic. That could change, but for the moment charging infrastructure has been slow to roll out. Above all, even after the subsidies, EVs made in the US aren't cheap. Hence the need for tariffs to make the competition more expensive.

“Good-paying union jobs” of the kind Biden tirelessly advocates are difficult for a high-wage economy like the US to sustain because the resulting production is likely to be internationally uncompetitive. A low-wage country can use subsidies to seed a new industry that might in due course thrive in global markets, allowing governments to withdraw support. In rich economies where labour is expensive, this formula enjoys less success. As incomes rise, manufacturing employment is apt to decline; work moves to other, more productive sectors. Maintaining, let alone expanding, factory employment will require ongoing government support — which, in turn, retards growth by slowing the flow of resources to better uses.

In effect, Bidenomics is a strategy for sustaining persistently uncompetitive industries. Sometimes that's defensible — provided the costs aren't too high. The subsidies and production incentives that the US has offered to this point aren't enough. The US faces another “China shock”, as National Economic Council director Lael Brainard puts it. Tariffs of no less than 100% are needed to protect America's nascent EV industry. For the sake of good-paying union jobs, Americans must be prohibited from buying cheap imported EVs.

This won't be the last stupid-but-necessary idea in the sequence. The tariffs will prevent EV prices in the US from falling as quickly as they otherwise would, slowing the market-driven take-up of this supposedly essential technology. If the administration is to keep its promises on climate change, it will need other ways of inducing Americans to drive EVs.

Right now, Biden's officials aren't really pressing the national-security argument. The China threat lurks in the background, of course, but the main case for high tariffs on EVs and other Chinese exports — the China shock — is more traditionally economic. It rests on Beijing's market-distorting policies. According to this view, US producers can't match their Chinese rivals not because US costs are too high but because China's exports are artificially cheap, driven down by Beijing's deliberate pursuit of industrial excess capacity.

A stickler for consistency might pause at this logic. When the US adopts trade-distorting policies (subsidies, “made in America”, tariffs), this is apparently a long-overdue recognition of the failures of the market and the case for shrewd, self-interested economic planning. When China does the same, it's artificial — a hostile act and a threat to global economic stability.

Be that as it may, trade-distorting policies do, you know, distort trade. America's industrial policies, wise or unwise from a selfish point of view, can make its trading partners worse off. Pro-trade, positive-sum outcomes are at least imaginable. But governments, led by the US, have chosen to go the other way. According to prevailing opinion, it was a mistake even to hope for cooperation. China, it's argued, is a cheat and should never have been allowed into the World Trade Organization: That institution is now defunct and beyond repair.

I disagree, but let's see how the negative-sum alternative of protection, retaliation and counter-retaliation works out. It's early days, and the cycle of error piled upon error has plenty of room to run.

NEW TOOLS INCLUDING THE LATEST FROM GOOGLE AND OPENAI WARRANT SCEPTICISM

AI-powered assistants & risks

LAST WEEK, GOOGLE and OpenAI made groundbreaking announcements. They introduced new GenAI-powered assistants that can engage in real-time conversations, even adapting when interrupted, mirroring human interaction. These assistants are not just limited to conversation; they can also analyse your surroundings through live video and translate conversations on the spot.

Google announced new tools at its I/O Conference last Tuesday, including enhancements to its bewildering array of products under the Gemini AI tool banner, with a faster “Flash” version and a “Live” version to compete with OpenAI's new ChatGPT 4o announced the day before. Google also announced that it is building Gemini into a “do everything” model that will run across almost all its product suites — as it already does across search and Google's web-based tools and applications such as Docs and Sheets, much like Microsoft's Copilot AI assistant tool for its Office suite of applications.

For its part, OpenAI's conversational ChatGPT 4o model can supposedly respond with a lag time of 320 milliseconds, which is about the same as human speech. (Some long-married couples might claim that their partner's response is 10 times as fast, but that's a topic for another forum.) It also incorporates humour, sarcasm, song, and other human-like aspects in its responses to the user.

ChatGPT 4o will be free, but usage caps will be set. If you need more than the capped level, you can access a significantly faster model for \$20 a month. Google's Gemini Advanced (one among its confusing suite of Gemini products) will have a two-month free trial and cost

\$20 a month after that.

Both OpenAI and Google claim that their models are well-tested. OpenAI says GPT-4o was evaluated by more than 70 experts in fields like misinformation and social psychology. Google has said that Gemini “has the most comprehensive safety evaluations of any Google AI model to date, including for bias and toxicity”.

These companies are building a future where AI models search, vet, and evaluate the world's information for us to serve up a quick — and hopefully correct — answer to our questions. But the truth is that these models can “hallucinate” and provide patently wrong answers to your questions. The nature of GenAI models means that they can make up things as they go along, simply due to how they are engineered. This hallucination is not to mention biases and other issues these companies claim to have ironed out.

Speaking of which, there was other disturbing news last week. On Friday, Wired magazine said that OpenAI's Long Term AI Risk team had been disbanded and that Ilya Sutskever, OpenAI's co-founder, had left the company. Sutskever co-lead this team with Jan Leike, who has also left the company, as

did many top researchers from that team. (bit.ly/3WTug89)

This isn't comforting. Although Sutskever had helped CEO Sam Altman start OpenAI in 2015 and set the direction of the research that led to ChatGPT, he was also one of the four board members who fired Altman in November. Altman was restored as CEO after pandemicum reigned for five days and a mass revolt by OpenAI staff led to the brokering of a deal in which Sutskever

and two other company directors left the board. Sutskever's staying on at the company at least meant that it had retained some of its conscience since he had been asked just a few months earlier (in July) to co-lead the governance and internal research policing unit of the company.

With Sutskever, Leike, and many of those key team members now absent, OpenAI will have to work hard to ensure that it retains its believability in its attempts to regulate itself. It claims that the remainder of the team has now been reabsorbed into its other research efforts. To me, this is astonishing, considering that it was just in July last year that OpenAI formed this team, with a promise that it would receive 20%

of the company's computing power. How one swallows an independent one-fifth of a company's research capacity into other research departments is unclear, especially since the absorbed fifth was put in place precisely to keep the other four-fifths in check.

To be fair to OpenAI, Sutskever, Leike, and team were focused on “artificial general intelligence” or AGI, a step up from today's AI, where AI equals or eclipses general human-like intelligence, which, at least for now, seems far off — there are other efforts at the firm that aim to keep its AI releases responsible until then. OpenAI's focus on long-term safety has certainly had impacts across the large language model (LLM) and GenAI space. That said, losing a co-founder tasked with internal regulation and corporate responsibility for its products is not welcome news.

But back to the new tools from Google and OpenAI. We will soon be able to explore them for ourselves to gauge whether we can turn to these tools in our day-to-day tasks as much as these firms hope we will — or whether they're more like party tricks that eventually lose their charm. The internet is littered with many such experiments. And then there is the issue of “hallucination” I referenced before. According to IBM, “AI hallucination is a phenomenon wherein a large language model (LLM) — often a generative AI chatbot or computer vision tool — perceives patterns or objects that are nonexistent or imperceptible to human observers, creating outputs that are nonsensical or altogether inaccurate.” (bit.ly/3UMZ0pk)

While engaging with these new tools, even more so than the simpler chatbots that are already available, it's wise to stay sceptical.

The seed of India's nuclear assertion



AMIT DHOLAKIA

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Fifty years ago, the Pokhran test prompted a shift in the great powers' strategy on handling nuclear materials with more stringent procedures and safeguards

FIFTY YEARS AGO, at 8:05 am on May 18, 1974, the tranquillity of the arid village of Lokhari, situated near Pokhran test range in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, was shaken by the detonation of a nuclear explosive device, positioned approximately seven metres beneath the ground. The device exhibited a hexagonal cross-section, measuring 1.25 metres in diameter, and weighing 1,400 kilograms. Its design was of the implosion type, bearing a resemblance to the American nuclear bomb, the Fat Man, which devastated Nagasaki during World War II.

This event was codenamed Operation Smiling Buddha by the government of India. It marked the first nuclear test by a country outside the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Operation Smiling Buddha represented a crucial milestone in the evolution of India's nuclear programme and instilled a sense of pride in its scientific, technological, and military capabilities. Although the ministry of external affairs characterised this test as a “peaceful nuclear explosion” (PNE) intended for research to harness nuclear energy for economic development, this event was integrally linked with a series of five nuclear tests, codenamed Operation Shakti, conducted at again at Pokhran in May 1998 which officially established India's status as a nuclear state.

India's scientific community exerted multidimensional and strenuous efforts to make the Buddha smile on May 18, 1974. The inception of India's nuclear programme can be traced back to Homi Bhabha, justly regarded as its founding father. His preparations began even

prior to India's independence and before the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 1944, Bhabha proposed the establishment of a nuclear research institute to the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. This proposal came to fruition in the form of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in December 1945. Following Independence, the Nehru government established the Indian Atomic Energy Commission in 1948. It was followed by the creation of the department of atomic energy in the Union ministry, with Bhabha appointed as its first secretary, reporting directly to the Prime Minister.

The 1950s saw the rapid establishment of the Apsara and CIRUS reactors, facilitated by assistance from the UK, US, and Canada. Nehru also approved the first nuclear power plant at Tarapur. While there is no authoritative public chronology or definitive document about the decision-making process of the government on the 1974 nuclear explosion, fragments of information from the scientists involved in the project suggest that it took seven years, from 1967 to 1974, for India to prepare for the test. Then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi provided explicit directives to the scientific and defence establishments to keep India's nuclear options open and to conduct a test when necessary. The process involved several critical steps: acquisition of fissile material (specifically, plu-

tonium), design of an explosive device, fabrication and assembly of the device's components, completion of a neutron initiator, preparation of the test site, and the placement of post-explosion diagnostic instruments. The project employed a limited team of 75 scientists and engineers to maintain secrecy.

Following Bhabha's demise in a plane crash in 1966, several scientists oversaw the preparations leading to Operation Smiling Buddha. These included Vikram Sarabhai, Raja Ramanna, PK Iyengar, Homi Sethna, R Chidambaram, and BD Nagchaudhuri. PN Dhar and PN Haksar, who were close advisors to the Prime Minister, defence minister Jagjivan Ram and army chief Gopal Gurnath, also played significant roles in the decision-making process steered by Indira Gandhi.

The scientific and security community engaged with the nuclear programme had commenced serious deliberations for India's nuclear test immediately after China's atomic bomb test in 1964. The nuclearisation of China, which had seized substantial portions of Indian territory in 1962, posed a direct threat to India's security and sovereignty. The threat was not merely territorial but also ideological, as Mao Zedong fostered the subversive Naxal movement.

The pressure exerted by the great powers on India to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which aimed to perpetuate a discriminatory and unequal

nuclear status quo by privileging the P5 countries, coupled with the threatening stance of the US against India during the Bangladesh war, intensified India's resolve to develop a full-scale nuclear capability. India's decisive victory in the Bangladesh war and its dominance in South Asian geopolitics necessitated an assertion of nuclear ambitions.

The rapprochement between the US and China, facilitated by Henry Kissinger in the early 1970s, exacerbated India's vulnerabilities to external threats. The reclamation of India's lost prestige as a regional power and an emerging global actor constituted a major driving force behind the 1974 test. Besides, when Indira Gandhi's government faced massive domestic unrest, and protests, the test helped her government garner more popularity and legitimacy.

India's nuclear test prompted a shift in the great powers' strategy on handling nuclear materials. They instituted more stringent procedures and safeguards to oversee nuclear exports and supplies. Consequently, India experienced nearly three decades of isolation from the global nuclear technology and supply regime until the restrictions were eased following the ratification of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal in 2008 by the US Congress.

Aware of the gap between tests and weaponisation of nuclear capability, and short of delivery systems, India adopted a nuanced strategic stance in the post-PNE period. It maintained a policy of deliberate ambiguity and ambivalence while vouching for its moral and political commitment to the peaceful utilisation of nuclear energy and nuclear disarmament.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Electoral debates

India is an underdeveloped country. Indian politicians generally tend to lack in educational qualification and are notorious for mud-slinging, horse-trading, high-handedness, corruption, amassing illegal wealth, etc. No leader has the vision to transform this country. India being a federal set-up, politicians like to fish in troubled waters by stoking communal and regional sentiments of people. Open

debates are always welcome and is a basic need in democracy. Open debates and press conferences bring out the expressions of election candidates and the voters can decide for themselves whether they are speaking the truth or trying to masquerade lies as truth. Flourishing democracies like the US always make it a point to grill the candidates in open debates and press conferences. India, which claims to be a thriving democracy, should not hesitate to

organise open debates for candidates before elections.

—Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

No country for the ailing

Apologies of “Unhealthy tax”, healthcare is one of the most neglected sectors in India and the spiralling cost of healthcare ensures that an illness in the family will not just wipe away all savings but also push them into debt. The hardest hit are pensioners, who after paying all kinds

of taxes through their working life, get nothing in return from the government. Insurance companies would do well to keep an eye on the various charges of hospitals incurred on needless diagnostics and treatment of patients who have medical insurance. This can help reduce the premiums charged, benefitting those seeking the same.

—Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

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OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

Saving trees to beat the heat

India has lost a chunk of its farmland trees. This trend needs to be reversed, which may need policy tweaks

The exceptionally high summer temperatures hold a lesson: India badly needs affordable, easy-access adaptation measures to protect people from extreme heat, an impact of the climate crisis that manifests regularly every summer. Access to shade from the scorching sun can help save people, especially in rural areas. However, evidence suggests a trend in the reverse.

New research that mapped 0.6 billion farmland trees in India, excluding block plantations, and tracked them over the past decade, found that around 11 ± 2% of the large trees (about 96 m² crown size) from 2010/2011 had disappeared by 2018. Then, during 2018–2022, more than five million large farmland trees (about 67 m² crown size) vanished, partly due to altered cultivation practices, where trees within fields are perceived as detrimental to crop yields. India's farmland trees include multipurpose ones such as *khejri* (*Prosopis cineraria*), *neem* (*Azadirachta indica*), *mahua* (*Madhuca longifolia*), gum (*Acacia nilotica*), and Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia sissoo*), which provide a variety of ecosystem services from conservation (for example, soil fertilisation and shade) to consumption (fruits, fuelwood, fibre, mulch, medicine, fodder). This is possibly the first time that the status of individual large trees is being mapped using microsatellites providing spatial resolution of 3–5 m. The results are a cause for worry, suggesting that India is gradually losing a major, low-hanging climate adaptation solution. This also reinforces why India's rural heartland is becoming dustier and drier and living conditions even more difficult.

This trend needs to be reversed, which may necessitate policy tweaks. For example, this newspaper reported in February that a new notification by the Union environment ministry said corporations and other private entities could sponsor plantations on degraded land, including open forest and scrubland, wasteland and catchment areas, and avail green credits, which could be traded. The fear that this could result in a change in land use and impact biodiversity is genuine: India's experience with plantations, especially raised through social forestry schemes, is that they encourage monoculture and rarely enrich biodiversity or contribute to livelihoods. It is time the conservation ecosystem recognises the role of farmland trees, especially their heat-mitigation potential, and formulate policies in consonance with the needs of citizens and communities. A Supreme Court-appointed committee recently identified older/larger trees as having a higher ecological value. That's a good first step; now policy has to follow.

Need to transcend voter apathy in cities

Early trends from the polling in Mumbai constituencies on Monday suggest that the turnout will struggle to match the 2019 peak of 55.4%. This is in line with the worldwide trend of apathy among urban voters towards elections. Mumbai, of course, is not an exception in India: Metros such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Pune tend to record turnouts lower than in their rural neighbourhood. Take Bengaluru. The city recorded a turnout of 54.1% this election when polling across Karnataka concluded with a turnout of 69.9%. Similarly, Maharashtra recorded a 62.9% turnout in the first four phases, while Mumbai is struggling to match the 2019 figure.

Various reasons have been offered to explain the urban voter's apathy to cast his/her vote — from weather to dissatisfaction with the candidates. In Mumbai's case, intense campaigning by candidates in what is a deeply polarised election, and the extra efforts by the administration to raise voter participation, likely came up against these, and also the prospect of an extended weekend (the elections were on Monday, which was declared a holiday). While there are structural reasons such as flaws in electoral rolls that contribute to the low turnouts, the fact is urban centres contain atomised societies, in which individuals do not necessarily relate to the larger social dynamic, including the democratic process. And if rural voters weaponise elections to censure the state, urban voters do not necessarily view participation in elections from a rights perspective.

Delhi, which votes on Saturday, has a relatively better record (60.6% in 2019) — but the challenge this time is posed by the fact that May 23 is a public holiday, making for a four-day weekend for those willing to take Friday off. Will Delhi do better than its peers?

OVER THE HORIZON

Arunabha Ghosh



Rethinking economics in times of climate crisis

In a warming world, businesses and countries in the Global South need to become climate-ready and tap into opportunities that arise from the energy transition

A seismic shift is underway in the battleground between environmental imperatives and economic realities, challenging the very core of conventional economic wisdom. Climate change, once viewed only through the lens of extreme temperature fluctuations and weather patterns, and dismissed as a "polar bear problem", has morphed into a full-blown crisis. It now reverberates through global economies, impacting everything from the prices we pay for goods and services, the heat to which we have to adjust (India is currently reeling under severe heat waves), the location of industries, and the weight of different voices in international forums. To emerge as a leader in this rapidly heating world, businesses and countries in the Global South need to become climate-ready and tap into opportunities that arise from the energy transition. But this is where outdated economic logic challenges the evolving environmental logic.

I increasingly find myself reflecting on four fundamentals I was taught as

an economics student. These lessons no longer hold true and need a reality check.

First, we were taught that industrial policy is bad, rife with inefficiency and crony capitalism. However, given the current clean energy landscape, industrial policy can be a tool for emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs) to gain competitiveness along new technological and industrial frontiers. It can, for example, tackle some of the current concentration of clean energy technologies. According to an analysis by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), 70% of the global exports in solar photovoltaics came from only four countries in the last decade. These concentrations lead to high import dependence for low- and middle-income countries. Nearly all low- and middle-income countries were almost entirely dependent on concentrated imports of solar technologies and lithium-ion batteries over the last 10 years. We must keep the global clean energy market free, open and transparent. Cartelisation, creating islands of protectionist regulations, and creating non-tariff barriers are neither economically efficient nor politically wise. Whereas China has aggressively pursued subsidies to build up its clean energy prowess, now industrial policy in the European Union and the United States, while necessary for their own clean energy transitions, risks diverting investment from EMDEs. So, fast-growing EMDEs must make concerted pushes to invest in cleantech industries and position themselves as

nodes within cleantech supply chains.

Second, contrary to neoclassical economics, capital does not flow from capital-rich to capital-poor regions. Nobel Laureate Robert Lucas pointed this out as the Lucas Paradox. For instance, in the case of the energy transition, money does not flow to where the sun shines the most, namely the Global South. The cost of capital in developing countries and economies is several percentage points higher than in OECD countries. Some of that is driven by the real risks of investing in these geographies, but in large part, it is due to perceived risks. Our priority, then, must be to use climate finance not just for the deployment of cleantech, but also to build manufacturing capacity and supply chains across low-, middle- and high-income economies. For this to happen, limited public capital and finance from multilateral development banks must be used to guarantee against policy risks and hedge against currency risks.

Third, conventional economic wisdom holds that technology, or the x-factor in growth equations, is exogenously determined, resulting in shifts in the production frontier. But the world's transition to cleaner energy shows why technology policy and development are endogenous and often restricted within a few countries. We find that 95% of clean energy technology patents are owned by citizens in high-income and upper-middle-income countries. The bigger challenge? Many of these patents will not expire before the 2030 climate targets set under the Paris Agree-



India is currently reeling under severe heat waves

AFP

ment. This means that EMDEs either face high cleantech acquisition costs or do not have the time to reverse-engineer existing technologies. A new paradigm of technology co-development must be pursued between advanced economies and EMDEs. This not only requires financing but also the exchange of technical and human resources. The geographies of emerging markets can be used as laboratories for cleantech that will be deployed in these fast-growing economies.

A fourth flawed lesson economics students are often taught is that as long as the price is right, energy and resources will flow unhindered. This notion now stands on shaky ground in an era of energy insecurity and geopolitical turbulence. Fifty years have passed since the oil shocks of the 1970s, which spurred cooperation towards pooled energy security among mostly rich and energy-hungry countries. Today, we find ourselves grappling with similar questions but regarding the secure supply and distribution of sustainable energy resources, technologies and products. Solar panels, wind turbines, critical minerals embedded in a battery, or green hydrogen electrolyzers are missing a global architecture to ensure security of supply to match burgeoning demand across much wider geographies compared to the

1970s. This needs more diversified and interdependent value chains, access to capital, and co-developed technologies, but also rules and standards to preempt regulatory islanding and non-tariff barriers to trade in cleantech. The absence of an energy security architecture for the fuels of the future and price wars will create geopolitical risks and suboptimal markets rather than bring equilibrium and security to global energy markets.

Last year, at the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi, the world's major economies came out and announced a bold new GDP — a Green Development Pact. If we take these failed economic lessons and reality checks into account, this new GDP can help us forge a covenant for green development that is simultaneously sustainable and economical. Economics 101 makes sense only when we make unreal assumptions about the real world. We should stop expecting reality to fit theory and instead design policy to correct for market failures — to build a clean future and jobs, growth and sustainability for all.

Arunabha Ghosh is CEO, Council on Energy, Environment and Water. The views expressed are personal. This article draws on the author's keynote at the International Vienna Clean Energy and Climate Forum

SIMPLY ECONOMICS

Pramit Bhattacharya



Inequality debate must centre around evidence

The soft power of the world's biggest superpower has been built on the narrative of the "great American dream". This narrative suggests that any American — regardless of her income, location, or social background — can aspire to a vastly richer life. One only needs to be willing to work hard to fulfil that aspiration.

During the post-Depression boom in the 1940s, the American dream did come alive. People from the working class became executives and business tycoons. Most people had better economic prospects than their parents did. Over time, that dream has faded. Young Americans are no longer confident that their lives are going to be better than that of their parents. The great American dream appears to be a great American myth to many of its citizens today. The rise in economic populism (and Trumpism) partly reflects their insecurities.

The unravelling of the American dream has been chronicled most effectively by an American economist of Indian origin, Raj Chetty. In a landmark 2016 research paper, Chetty showed that a child born in the 1940s had a 90% chance of exceeding her parents' income. By the 1980s, that chance had declined to 50%. A more recent Chetty paper based on granular neighbourhood data suggests a strong local effect on life outcomes. Whether one ends up being a successful entrepreneur or ends up in jail for peddling drugs depends on the micro-location in which one is brought up. Chetty's research suggests.

Countries that are poorer than the United States (US) also tend to be poorer in statistics. Hence the kind of high-quality granular datasets that Chetty uses for his research is simply unavailable in India. Nonetheless, the limited data that does exist suggests that the accident of birth has an outsized influence on life outcomes even here.

A 2018 report by World Bank researchers showed that intergenerational educational mobility in India is much lower than in five other large developing countries the researchers studied — China, Brazil, Indonesia, Egypt, and Nigeria. In other words, children of under-educated parents in India find it much more difficult to rise up the educational ladder than in other parts of the developing world. A 2019 analysis of the Annual State of Education Report (ASER) database showed that children from privileged families — those with access to better housing and household amenities — had better learning outcomes ("Privilege shapes school outcomes", January 22, 2019) compared to peers. Among under-privileged families, children with better-educated parents had higher learning outcomes.

A 2021 research paper by economists Sam Asher, Paul Novosad, and Charlie Rafkin suggests that intergenerational educational mobility has improved for Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCs and STs) since the 1960s but not for Muslims. Upward mobility is higher

in urban areas, in areas with high levels of schooling and in South India, their research suggests. Reservations for SCs and STs may have helped them narrow the educational gap with other caste groups, the authors argue.

A 2020 research paper by the economists Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran showed that children from marginalised caste groups are more likely to be stunted than forward-caste Hindus. The high rates of stunting (an indicator of chronic undernourishment) among SCs, STs, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) explain why India's nutrition indicators are worse than that of many poorer countries, the duo argued. A 2022 research paper by the demographers Sangita Vyas, Payal Hathi, and Ashish Gupta found similar patterns in health outcomes. Compared to "high-caste Hindus" (forward castes and OBCs), life expectancies of STs was four years lower, that of SCs three years lower, and that of Muslims about a year lower, the researchers wrote.

Over the past four decades, India's growth engine has lifted millions from poverty, and improved living conditions across the country. But a growing body of evidence suggests that the extent of improvement has varied sharply across regions and social groups. Hence, the Opposition parties' demand for better evidence on the extent of socio-economic inequality in the country has merit.

The ruling party's negative response to this demand may have been shaped by electoral considerations. But once the elections get over, both sides will need to shape a consensus on how best to get accurate data on different aspects of socio-economic inequality in the country. The results of a recent YouGov-Mint-CPR survey suggest that even affluent urban youth are not averse to the Opposition's demand for a caste census. A large section of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters view this demand favourably.

The evidence and analysis presented by Chetty and other scholars in the US have sparked an intense debate on the causes and consequences of inequality in the "land of opportunities". The American philosopher Michael Sandel has argued against the "myth of meritocracy" that divides American society into two opposing camps of winners and losers. Most wins in life are the result of favourable circumstances, and the ideology of meritocracy tends to downplay that, Sandel has argued. Although disagreement persists on how to remedy American inequality, there is a fair amount of agreement on the nature and extent of the problem.

The world's largest democracy also needs to have a reasoned debate on inequality. Gathering detailed and credible evidence on inequality patterns should be the first step towards that goal.

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Chennai-based journalist. The views expressed are personal

{ LAI CHING-TE } TAIWANESE PRESIDENT

As the future of both sides of the Taiwan Strait will have a decisive impact on the world's development, we will be the helmsmen of peace

After he was sworn in as the president at a ceremony in Taipei

The West must pause selling arms to Israel

As Israel ratchets up its military offensive in Gaza, western nations have come under scathing criticism for supplying arms to Israel. United States (US) President Joe Biden recently said the US would halt the shipment of offensive weapons to Israel if it invaded Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. Simultaneously, there are reports of the US planning to sell more than \$1 billion in new weapons to Israel. As death and destruction continue unabated in Gaza, the pressure is mounting on several countries, including the US, to stop the supply of arms to Israel because of the apprehension that these arms are being used in allegedly committing war crimes.

But this is not just a political question. There is a powerful legal dimension to it. Several lawsuits have already been filed in the domestic courts of countries like the United Kingdom (UK), the US, Canada, Denmark, and the Netherlands questioning the export of arms to Israel. A court in Hague has ordered the Dutch government to forbid the supply of F-35 jet fighter spare parts to Israel due to a "clear risk" of serious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) being committed in Gaza. Internationally, Nicaragua has brought a claim against Germany before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), targeting the material assistance Germany provides to Israel in alleged breach of the Genocide Convention and IHL. Nicaragua requested the ICJ for provisional measures against Germany, directing it to stop providing material support to Israel, including military assistance. The ICJ did not accept Nicaragua's request. Nonetheless, this case demonstrates the significance of this issue and the need to understand the international legal obligations that bind countries when exporting arms to other countries.

The most noteworthy treaty containing the law on arms exports is the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 and entered into force in 2014. The objective of the ATT is to regulate international trade in conventional arms by keeping the principles of the UN Charter in mind. Article 6(2) of the ATT prohibits a country from transferring conventional arms to another country if such transfer would vio-

late its international obligations. Article 6(3) of the ATT is more specific. It bars a country from supplying conventional arms if it has the "knowledge" that these arms "would be used in the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, attacks directed against civilian objects or civilians protected as such, or other war crimes". The word "knowledge" is not defined in the treaty. Thus, whether the transferring State has the "knowledge" that its arms would be used in the commission of genocide and other war crimes will have to be ascertained by examining the international circumstances. The transferring State must undertake a risk assessment, also indicated in Article 7(1), to determine whether the recipient State will use the arms it supplies to commit war crimes.

President Biden's statement indicates that the US has the "knowledge" that its arms would be used in attacking civilians in the city of Rafah. Thus, under Article 6(3) of the ATT, the US should not be supplying arms to Israel. Moreover, South Africa's case against Israel before the ICJ for the alleged commission of genocide in Gaza and the ICJ's two provisional measures order against Israel earlier this year constitute material international circumstances that the US and other arms-supplying countries need to consider. While it is not legally established yet that Israel has breached the Genocide Convention, it is critical to recall that the ICJ, earlier this year, held that prime facie, South Africa's claims may fall within the Genocide Convention and that it is plausible that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. In its second provisional measures order, the ICJ expressed its concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza and ordered Israel to take all necessary steps to provide humanitarian assistance. Despite the ICJ's orders, the ground situation in Gaza hasn't improved materially. In light of all this, the US and other countries are under a legal obligation to pause the supply of arms to Israel.

Prabhansh Ranjan is a Humboldt fellow and professor at the Jindal Global Law School. The views expressed are personal

OUR VIEW



Big profits no reason to go slow on bank reform

India's PSB privatization agenda has a long way to go. Regardless of profits, banks would serve the Indian economy better under wide private ownership than under the government

Banks in India reported record profits last year, public sector banks (PSBs) included, but a stellar bank performance is no reason to abandon reforms in this sector. Bank privatization, for instance, has evidently taken a back seat, with no major moves seen lately by way of the government diluting its ownership. Perhaps the big mergers executed a few years ago that brought down the count of PSBs in India to 12 from 27 got policymakers to step off the pedal. Now with swelling profits stuffing public coffers, off-loading banks may slide further down the priority order. But banking remains much too public-sector dominated. Government equity control must come down, so that these banks are subject to market discipline, with private owners keeping watch. As a business of judging risk and pricing credit, banking tends to perform best over time when bank managers are held to account by a crowd of owners united only by profit as a common interest. Which is why this upswell should be taken as an opportunity to privatize PSBs. The finances of PSBs have never looked so robust. Their net profits hit ₹1.4 trillion in 2023-24, up 34% from 2022-23, while bad loans as a proportion of their total advances are at a decadal low of under 4%. These bright numbers are reflected in the stock-market strength of listed lenders. It is no surprise that private banks have performed even better. Ever since being allowed in, they have been taking business away from PSBs. Their net profits grew a stronger 42% to ₹1.7 trillion in 2023-24. The loan books of private banks also look cleaner, overall. With credit growth in good shape across the sector, most banks look reasonably well placed right now, even if their

tilt towards retail lending over corporate loans isn't ideal. The big policy question is whether and when further chunks of PSB equity will go private. The sense that this process may have stalled stems from the government's failure last year to privatize IDBI Bank as planned. In the context of this miss, reports had emerged that PSB privatization would be put through a rethink. The idea has always faced resistance. If PSBs can be profitably run and also serve as instruments of state policy, some critics ask, why privatize them? As with the central bank's surplus, the Centre may also be tempted to rely on profitable PSBs for revenues. These arguments do not take the larger picture into account. As capital plays an ever larger role as the economy's mover and shaker, we need a credit market that's as efficient as it can get. This requires lenders to achieve corporate governance and operational efficiency levels that are globally competitive. Widely held bank shares would promote both and result in better allocation of financial resources. A profit bonanza should not get in the way of bank privatization, an agenda that has its own merits. It's true that the Centre often depends on its network of PSBs to meet welfare objectives like financial inclusion; indeed, this is why banks were nationalized back in 1969. However, retaining the State Bank of India is all the government needs for that purpose; this PSB's vast reach across India should suffice. We should aim to privatize the rest as we go along. For the market discipline of private ownership to take full effect, shareholder dispersal is key. Instead of strategic stake sales, let's make public offerings of equity. Or perhaps award PSB shares to citizens at large via direct transfers. The *status quo* is sub-optimal.

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist.

This story is possibly apocryphal, but nevertheless worth telling. Just after independence, Jawaharlal Nehru instructed his party workers to go to the masses in the hinterland and spread the good news. That the British had left, and we were a free nation now. The workers heard a common refrain, "Oh, the British have left? Who's going to rule us now?" This was not the voice of a broken spirit, but of instinctive subjecthood. This had been people's default status through the ages under various kingdoms and also the British. They naturally assumed that new a set of rulers would reign. Hence the early work on strengthening the foundations of our newly born democratic republic in 1947 was to champion the basic idea that the people are supreme. Not elected officials, not Members of Parliament, and not even the Constitution can be above the people. They are the bosses. After 75 years, have we finally internalized this idea? Does it manifest in our public life and governance? A sophisticated analysis of this question would need a

careful study of the evolution and maturing of India's politics and democracy. But there are enough indicators to suggest that we are still closer in status as subjects rather than masters. It is still a "maai-baap sarkar" (a paternal state) that protects and nourishes, and to which people turn to for all their problems. The legacy of subjecthood now survives as politics of patronage. The political dialogue is not being conducted with the citizen, but with a beneficiary or "labhaarthi." This framing of the relationship robs people of their agency as voter-citizens and treats the electorate simply as recipients of largesse from the government or state. Welfareism has been ascendant in India for more than two decades. It has taken the form of provisions such as free foodgrain, free electricity, water connections, a housing subsidy, cooking gas, almost free health insurance, crop insurance and of course cash transfers. Its scope is ever expanding. In the current election campaign, welfareism has turned into competitive welfareism. It is as if votes can be bought by whoever offers the bigger package of welfare benefits. Leave aside the issue of whether this constitutes bribery of the voter. But in a subtle way, it undermines a legitimate and mature political discourse between electors and those who seek to be elected.

Just two years ago, there was a vigorous debate about freebies, initiated by the Prime Minister himself. Even the Reserve Bank of India weighed in, and the Supreme Court too appointed an expert body to regulate freebies promised in electoral campaigns. But that debate seems to be forgotten. In any case, the extension of the free food-grain scheme covering two-thirds of India's population for another five years is largely unquestioned. We don't know about how much is meant for the poor, how much is resold and how much goes to feed cattle. In competition the leading opposition party in its manifesto has promised to double the quantity of entitlement of free grain. It is quite likely that the scheme of free food, which started during the pandemic, might have delivered the twin objectives of food security and protection from food inflation (since it was being given in kind and not as cash). But we forget that the current free food scheme began with the National Food Security Act of 2013, which in turn was the result of a long

and determined campaign by civil society groups, alarmed by starvation deaths, hunger and malnutrition. RBI seemed to be okay with free food, but not free electricity, as it places an extra burden on state government budgets. It can also be argued that providing free or almost free housing and health insurance adds to people's capabilities and their ability to participate in the economy. The distinction between freebies, welfare benefits and subsidies is already blurred, and today's election promises are solidifying the legitimacy of welfare schemes. We might soon get a universal basic income for every citizen—nay, beneficiary. Forgotten is the crucial issue of why should the state be providing an array of private goods? Welfare economics is a branch of the discipline that focuses on the well-being of individuals. It aims to evaluate economic policies and outcomes based on their impact on people's welfare. The fact of rapid expansion and bipartisan acceptance of welfareism is an acknowledgement of the fact that the com-

petitive market economy is not generating the desired outcomes. The most glaring aspect of this is India's ever-widening inequality in wealth and income. Another aspect is the slow pace of job creation and livelihoods. There is also the silent erosion in people's purchasing power caused by persistent inflation. Hence, for a variety of reasons, increasing welfareism is unquestioned. What's missing is an adult dialogue between principals (the people) and their agents (the elected officials). This requires an awareness and acknowledgement of the fact that welfare benefits do not come from some magic bottomless reservoir. They come from the government treasury, which is funded by taxes, both direct and indirect. In essence, all election promises, "guarantees" and increased welfare benefits are necessarily a massive exercise in redistribution. It involves transfers from the rich to the poor, from taxpayers to the rest. The larger the overlap between taxpayers and voters, the fairer it will seem. The larger the size of the middle class, the fairer the bargain. India's move toward an even bigger welfare state is inevitable, but we can make this journey more meaningful by downplaying the role of the beneficiary and highlighting the role of the citizen, the voter and the taxpayer.

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

There is a reason why the stock market appears to love the BJP

BJP rule has meant lower corporate tax and more profit. This may change if the party loses power

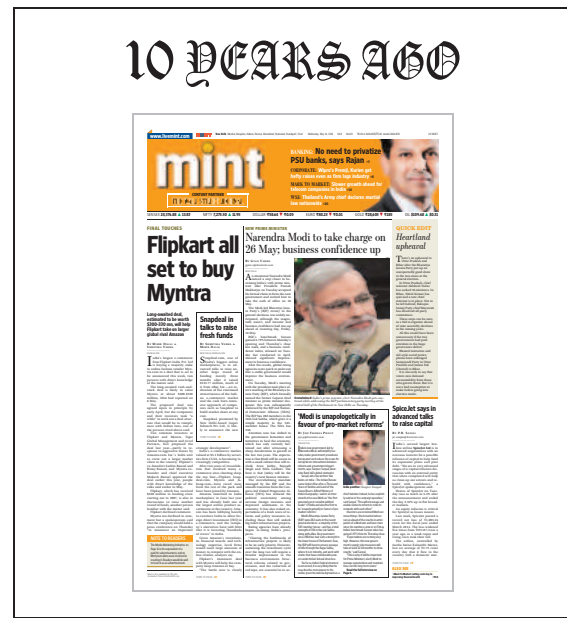


VIVEK KAUL is the author of 'Bad Money'.

Any stock market discounts future possibilities, especially what may happen in the near future. The Indian stock market isn't any different. And currently—despite what some pundits who emerge around election time are saying—on the whole, the market is factoring in a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) win in the Lok Sabha elections. Of course, there have been some jitters along the way, with the S&P BSE Sensex—India's most famous stock market index—seeing some high intraday swings. But since April, the difference between the Sensex's high of 75,124.3 points and a low of 71,816.5 points has been 4.4%, which isn't much when we take history into account. Also, on 17 May, the Sensex closed at 73,917 points, or 1.6% lower than the highest level since April, when the election started coming into focus. Now, the thing to remember is that the parts can behave differently from the whole. And that seems to be happening with the stock market as well. At a simple level, investors in the stock market can be divided into two broad categories: foreign institutional investors (FIIs) and domestic institutional investors (DIIs). Since April, FIIs have net sold stocks worth ₹369.1 billion, or around \$4.4 billion. In the same period, DIIs have on a net basis bought stocks worth ₹781.6 billion. Further, DIIs have net bought

stocks worth ₹339.7 billion just in May. DIIs are institutions like insurance companies, mutual funds, provident funds, banks, etc., which primarily invest the money they collect from retail investors. Further, investments made by DIIs include money coming in through systematic investment plans of equity mutual funds and investments made in government investment schemes like the Employees' Provident Fund and National Pension System. So, on the whole, Indian retail investors seem confident that the current dispensation will continue after 4 June, when the Lok Sabha election results will be declared. Also, FIIs on the whole seem to have a very small doubt about whether the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will get the same confident mandate it got in 2019, and hence, have been net sellers. FIIs owned Indian stocks worth around \$794 billion as of April end. Nonetheless, what is clear is that both FII and DIIs want the BJP-led NDA to continue to govern the country after 4 June. This leads to the question: Why does the stock market love the idea of a BJP-led NDA government? Since 2016, the government has worked towards increasing the formalization of the Indian economy through moves like demonetization and the goods and services tax (GST). This was followed by a cut in the rate of corporate income tax in September 2019 and the destructive impact of the pandemic on the informal sector, benefitting companies in the listed space through higher sales, lower tax and increased profits. Data of more than 5,000 listed companies from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy suggests that from 2018-19 to 2022-23, the net sales of these companies went up 52%, corporate taxes paid went up only 36% and their net profit rose sharply by 187%. In comparison, between 2014-15 and 2018-19, net sales had gone up 30%, corporate taxes by a higher 38% and net profit in 2018-19 was around 90% of the

profit in 2014-15. Clearly, among other things, lower taxes have helped spruce up profits of listed companies, pushing up stock prices. Of course, the huge amount of money printed by central banks after the pandemic broke out also helped. These dynamics seem to have worked wonderfully well for stock market investors over the last few years. And now there seems to be a small fear, at least among FIIs, that if the BJP-led NDA isn't elected again, happy days will go away: If the opposition-led alliance is elected, government expenditure will go up to finance the major plans laid out in their manifestos. Further, if the government chooses to finance higher expenditure through a higher fiscal deficit—the difference between what it earns and what it spends—it's likely to lead to higher interest rates and the crowding out of investments. If it chooses to raise tax collections, one obvious option would be to hike corporate taxes. The government won't want to raise GST rates because that would make it unpopular. Personal income tax collections have already gone up quite a bit. They stood at 2.44% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2018-19 and are expected to rise to 3.42% in 2024-25. Corporate taxes were at 3.51% in 2018-19 and are expected at 3.18% in 2024-25. So, any extra expenditure is likely to be financed through a higher corporate tax rate. The idea would be an easier sell to citizens as well. It will mean lower business earnings, unless company sales grow faster, and lower earnings typically mean lower stock prices. Now most retail investors won't have thought this through in detail. If they do so, they are more than likely to arrive at this conclusion. Institutional investors have probably already done so, though they won't say so in public. Indeed, a stock market is a weighing machine for the future, but, like anything else, it's conditioned to think by taking only its own incentives into account.



JUST A THOUGHT

It is well enough that people...do not understand our banking and monetary system, for if they did, I believe there would be a revolution before tomorrow morning.

HENRY FORD

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

We're not just beneficiaries but citizens and voters too



THEIR VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Greater social diversity in higher education is serving India well

Various social groups have shown encouraging enrolment rates but we must expand capacity vastly to fulfil aspirations



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The Indian higher education system is, by far, among the largest in the world today. Latest available data from the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) under the ministry of education from academic year 2021-22 shows that 43.2 million students are enrolled in the system, having grown at 4.1% compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) over nine years from 30 million in 2012-13.

Towards the objectives of inclusive enrolment and coverage, the country's reservation policy has undoubtedly yielded results. Between 2012-13 and 2021-22, enrolment among various social groups, shown alongside, has increased at impressive 9-year CAGRs.

Scheduled Caste (SC) enrolment has increased by 6.2% CAGR, from 3.84 million in 2012-13 to 6.6 million in 2021-22. Over the same period, Scheduled Tribe (ST) enrolment has increased by a significant 8.3% CAGR, from 1.32 million to 2.71 million. Other Backward Classes (OBC) enrolment is also moving at an impressive 6.3%, having increased from 9.4 million to 16.3 million. Enrolment of the country's Muslim community has increased from 1.25 million to 2.1 million at 6% CAGR, and that of other minorities from about 560,000 to 900,000 at 5.4% CAGR. 'General merit' enrolment, calculated by authors from total enrolment minus other listed groups, is stagnating at 0.7%. The government's focus on inclusion in higher education has clearly enabled rapid development of classes deemed as disadvantaged.

Comparing the enrolment proportion of various groups with their population compositions is revealing. Enrolment proportions for the SC, ST and OBC communities in 2021-22 are close to their population composition.

For the SC community, it is 15.3% enrolment against 16.6% of the population; remarkably close. For the ST community, 6.3% enrolment against 8.6% of the population; this, too, is quite close.

For the OBC community, 37.8% enrolment against 40.9% of the population; close, as well.

The same progress, however, is not seen among minority groups. Minorities constitute approximately one-fifth of India's population (as per Census 2011; no recent census data is available), but only about 7% of enrolment in higher education. Within minorities, only information of the Muslim community is available. The community constitutes 4.9% of total enrolment, versus 14.2% of India's population (as per Census 2011). However, the 9-year enrolment CAGR of 6% is impressive and can be utilized to drive enrolment up. Clearly, aspirations exist and can be encouraged.

Gender parity in Indian higher education drew level in 2019-20 and remains equal. Women are increasingly joining higher education with higher

Enrolment gains

The numbers have broadly risen although there is scope for improvement in the case of minorities whose proportion of higher-education enrolment is significantly lower than their share in India's population.

| Community | Enrolment (in million) | | | Population (in %) Census 2011 | HE Enrolment 9-yr CAGR (in %) |
|------------------|------------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | 2012-13 | 2021-22 | Share (in %) | | |
| SC | 3.9 | 6.6 | 15.3 | 16.6 | 6.2 |
| ST | 1.3 | 2.7 | 6.3 | 8.6 | 8.3 |
| OBC | 9.4 | 16.3 | 37.8 | 40.90 | 6.3 |
| Muslims | 1.3 | 2.1 | 4.9 | 14.2 | 6.0 |
| Other minorities | 0.6 | 0.9 | 2.1 | 6.0 | 5.4 |
| General | 13.8 | 14.6 | 33.6 | 13.6 | 0.7 |
| All | 30.2 | 43.3 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 4.1 |

| Community | Enrolment (male, in million) | | | Enrolment (female, in million) | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 2012-13 | 2021-22 | CAGR (in %) | 2012-13 | 2021-22 | CAGR (in %) |
| SC | 2.1 | 3.5 | 5.6 | 1.7 | 3.2 | 7.0 |
| ST | 0.7 | 1.4 | 7.2 | 0.6 | 1.4 | 9.6 |
| OBC | 5.1 | 8.5 | 5.9 | 4.3 | 7.8 | 6.8 |
| Muslims | 0.7 | 1.1 | 5.4 | 0.6 | 1 | 6.6 |
| Other minorities | 0.3 | 0.4 | 6.0 | 0.3 | 0.5 | 4.9 |
| General | 7.8 | 7.8 | 0.0 | 6.0 | 6.8 | 1.5 |
| All | 16.6 | 22.6 | 3.5 | 13.5 | 20.7 | 4.8 |

mint

Source: Census 2011, NSSO, AISHE

SATISH KUMAR/MINT

aspirations. The 10-year enrolment CAGR of women is 4.7% compared to 3.4% for men. Women are 48% of total enrolment in 2021-22, up from 44.6% ten years earlier. Women's gross enrolment ratio (GER) at 28.5 is higher than men's at 28.3. It has grown faster, from 19.4 in 2011-12 compared to 22.1 for men, indicating that more women in the 18-23-aged population view higher education as a gateway to a higher-quality life. For the nation, this is an encouraging trend that will vastly increase its qualified workforce. To fully capitalize on this, quality employment prospects must be grown all over the country that would help educated women join the workforce in locations close to their homes and towns.

Disaggregating the social groups' enrolment data by gender reveals Indian women's aspirations. As the accompanying data shows, across groups, the women's enrolment CAGR is ahead of men's. It is 7% for women versus 5.6% for men within the SC community, 9.6% versus 7.2% among people of the ST community and 6.8% versus 5.9% among OBCs.

Though the Muslim community's representation in higher education is far less than its population composition, here too, women's enrolment CAGR at 6.6% is far higher than men's at 5.4%. The 'other minorities' group is the only one where this score is reversed: it is 4.9% for women versus 6% for men. In the general merit category, men's enrolment has stagnated at zero as enrolment in years 2012-13 and 2021-22 is very similar. Women's enrolment in this group is 1.5%, higher than men's here as well.

Overall, the country's various social groups are faring well in higher education. Driving enrolment up in key groups and regions across India remains an important national goal and can be facilitated by expanding the capacity of existing institutions and setting up greenfield institutions in regions with low institutional capacity. Distance education can also be utilized to drive enrolment.

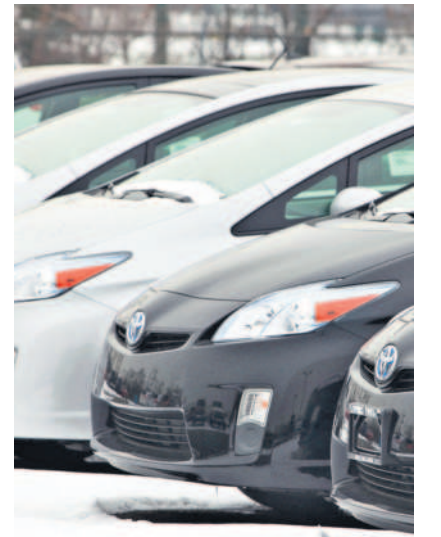
The key point here is that increasing the size of the country's cake will enable more people to partake of it, rather than slicing the existing cake into thinner and thinner slices.

Will Toyota's hybrid bridge to electric vehicles work by plan?

It reduces pioneer's risk and represents a well-calculated strategy



TIM CULPAN is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering technology in Asia.



Hybrids offer users the best of both worlds in this market

To get an idea of how Toyota Motor Corporation views the electric vehicle (EV) business, just take a look at how it reports car sales. Prominent in its breakdown is the category of electrified vehicles, divided into sub-categories: hybrids, plug-in hybrids, battery electric vehicles and fuel-cell models. For most EV makers, battery-electric is the only one that matters. Tesla Inc, for example, exclusively ships BEVs. In its view, and for many acolytes, a vehicle must have a battery and be exclusively charged from an external electricity source to earn the 'E' prefix. Its closest rival BYD exited the combustion-engine car market in 2022 and last year produced a roughly even split between battery and hybrid passenger cars.

For Toyota, the numbers are markedly different. Just 37% of the vehicles it sold last fiscal year were electrified, up from 30% the year prior. But purists point to a stark fact: Only 1.1% of its retail car sales were battery electric. This large disconnect stems from Toyota's decision to label even gasoline-powered EVs as "electric-powered." This can be confusing, but it's not entirely false. Hybrids use a combustion engine to create electricity, which then powers the motors. Plug-in hybrids split the difference, offering both gasoline and mains-powered fuelling.

Toyota reasons that in selling millions of hybrids to date, which have been more readily embraced by consumers than EVs, it has done as much as anyone to cut carbon dioxide. "Some people criticize hybrids because they have engines, but the amount of CO2 emissions reduced by these hybrids is the equivalent of 3 million BEVs," Chairman Akio Toyoda said on a company podcast published in April.

Given that Japan, in particular, derives most of its electricity from fossil fuels, Toyoda argues that a direct switch to electric charging isn't necessarily cleaner. It's a valid point, albeit one that doesn't sit well with EV purists.

Yet Toyota's reason for pushing hybrids over pure electric models may be less about the dirty power generators that still populate the planet and more about the fundamentals of market forces.

Despite all the hype about EVs, especially in China, most consumers globally aren't ready to make the shift. Range anxiety is among the primary reasons, Consumer Reports found, because drivers are confident that there's always a gasoline station close at hand, but worry there's a lack of charging bays. They have reason for concern—there's five times as many gas

pumps as EV chargers in the US, according to one recent study. So rather than preach to unwilling customers, Toyota is letting car buyers dip their toe in greener waters via hybrid cars. But it still wants credit for selling electrified models.

Most people's stance on this is more philosophical than environmental: Hybrids do burn fossil fuels, but they're still better than full-combustion models and produce lower emissions than battery-electric vehicles charged by coal-fired power stations. The swing factor is the cleanliness of a region's electricity supply.

Toyota's strategy may end up being the wiser choice. At first it seems like the Japanese company is taking a wait-and-see approach, and there's an element of that. Yet, executives will surely be aware that the road to an all-electric future is littered with failed EV startups as well as product delays and cancelled projects.

In the annals of automotive history, early names like Butler, Elmore and Armstrong Electric—one of the original EV companies—are forgotten. The founders of MySpace, Friendster and Pets.com will be aware that there's little advantage in being first. Equally, many will forlornly remember their Nokia cellphones and wonder why the Finnish giant wasn't able to adapt to the smartphone era.

Toyota's decades-long dominance of the global car industry doesn't come from any first-mover advantage. The Japanese company didn't invent cars or internal-combustion engines and it wasn't the premier proponent of just-in-time manufacturing—Ford Motor Company was decades ahead on that. Instead, the Japanese auto giant climbed to prominence through a methodical approach to vehicle and engine development, product-market fit, as well as efficient manufacturing and sales.

In moving slowly into EVs, Toyota may be taking a detour around the 'Pioneer's Trap.' There is a risk that a patient approach will see it miss out on some or all of the burgeoning market for EVs, especially after Tesla and BYD careened headlong into a product category even before consumers were ready. If that happens, it could be caught short like a modern-day Nokia. Then again, going down in history as the MySpace of cars isn't a place it wants to be either.

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MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

India is lukewarm to Nato's invitation for good reason

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/visiblehand

During the spring of 1948 in post-war Europe, an extra-parliamentary coup brought Czech communists to power in Prague. At the same time, there was an ongoing civil war in Greece and unrest in Turkey. In Italy, it appeared as if the Italian communist party would make inroads in an upcoming election. Russian premier Joseph Stalin made a move to test the West by blockading West Berlin. This series of events caused nations of Western Europe to seek the help of the United States. The US reciprocated with the Marshall Plan for Europe's economic recovery and with first steps towards the creation of a collective security architecture.

Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg signed a European collective defence treaty in 1948. President Harry Truman persuaded an isolationist Republican Congress to ally with Europe. Senator Arthur Vandenberg proposed a security treaty with Western Europe that would exist outside the UN Security Council (to circum-

vent a Soviet veto), but still adhere to the UN charter. The Vandenberg Resolution became the basis for the negotiations that resulted in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato).

Nato was born 75 years ago in 1949 with 12 members from Europe and North America, including the US, Canada, Britain, France, Norway and Denmark. Sweden chose not to join and maintained a policy of non-alignment in peace and neutrality in war. Even though the original idea of Nato was to protect Western countries against a potentially remilitarized Germany as well as communist Soviet Union, West Germany joined Nato in 1955. After that, Nato's role heightened as the Cold War worsened. Nato has now expanded to 32 countries, the most recent additions being Finland and Sweden. Nato's operational structure was catalysed by the Korean War that began in 1950.

The famous Article 5 of the treaty requires member states to come to the aid of any member state under armed attack. Article 5 has been invoked only once, and that too by the US, after the 11 September attacks. The less-known Article 4 requires consultation among members and has been invoked seven times. Elements of the Nato Response Force were activated for the first time in his-

tory during the current Ukraine war.

Nato has proven to be a credible deterrent in many instances, the most recent example being the containment of the Ukrainian conflict to just Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. Some political thinkers from the realist school, like professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago, believe that Nato's eastward expansion is culpable of having goaded Russia into conflict with Ukraine. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, despite Nato's initial expansion during that phase, its influence was in steady decline—until the Ukrainian war broke out.

Prior to its expansion, an agile Nato led by the US was able to make and execute decisions quickly. Today, its 32 member states have begun to openly squabble about things like leadership and often express opposing points of view. Turkey, Slovakia, Hungary and others have begun to express disagreements openly. The US under former president Donald Trump expressed disappointment over all members

not ponying up their share of Nato's budget.

While the containment of Russia is important to Nato, America's major strategic adversary has now become China. The US Congressional Committee on China has been seeking to expand Nato to include five more countries: Australia, New Zealand, Israel, India and Japan.

For these countries, one advantage of the proposed Nato-plus grouping is that the legislative process has already been completed by Nato's 32 members. The invitees simply have to approve. The obvious disadvantage is that the grouping would become even more unwieldy and disparate than before and its 'theatre' of focus would move from solely the North Atlantic to a very wide area that includes the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

There are other focused organizations that have been formed to counter potential threats posed by China's rise. The Quad grouping of the US, Japan, India and Australia as well as the more recent Aukus with Australia, the US and UK are examples of

smaller and more nimble strategic coalitions. In times ahead, the strategic intent of collaborating countries may be different, requiring more nuanced forms of collaboration, rather than simply lining up militarily.

Nato expansion could lead us to some perplexing scenarios. If Israel were part of Nato and had invoked Article 5 after last year's Hamas attacks, for example, what would have happened? Similarly, if India had invoked Article 5 after China's 2020 border incursions, it boggles the mind what might have ensued.

Even if India gets permanent membership of the UN Security Council, its power will be circumscribed by China's membership. In the same way as Nato was created to circumvent the Soviet veto, India may need a mechanism to get around a Chinese veto. Nevertheless, the era of broad and fixed alliances is over for the foreseeable future. Narrower and more flexible but friendly relationships are likely to serve India's future needs better.

As for Nato, Russia's belligerence has given it a lease of life. The pact may yet live to see a 100th anniversary, but will likely have to remain confined to the North Atlantic.

P.S.: To paraphrase Victor Hugo, how do you prolong the life of an idea whose time may have gone?



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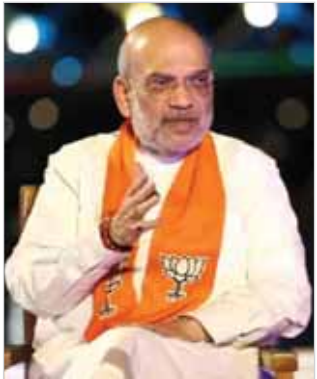
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PAPER WITH PASSION

The PoK hobgoblin

In election season, BJP leaders intensify campaign for PoK integration with India

If it is election season in India, can references to Pakistan be far behind? In 2019, it was Pulwama and the resultant surgical strikes. This time, an IAF convoy came under terror attack in the Poonch area on May 4, following which Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) made a rather late entry into the poll narrative. The call for reclaiming PoK is being given wide currency by the BJP; its top leaders are making bold assertions on the issue. Senior party leaders Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and Himanta Biswa Sarma have all recently underscored the BJP's commitment towards integrating PoK with India. To begin with, Amit Shah made a striking declaration, asserting that India will take PoK as it "belongs to us". The statement is seen as a bold political promise, aligning with the BJP's long-standing position on PoK. Then, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma echoed the sentiment, adding that the move is not merely aspirational but a realistic objective under the current Government. Then came Rajnath Singh's slightly different approach,



focusing on the human rights situation in PoK. Singh called on international bodies to take cognisance of the rights violations in the region. These statements during the ongoing polls are clear indication that the BJP wants to draw people's attention to this long-pending issue. They also underline the party's strategic use of PoK as a rallying point in the lead-up to the elections, aiming to consolidate support among nationalist segments.

Indeed, the situation in PoK is not good. The locals there are demanding greater autonomy and political rights, more self-governance and local control. They are also concerned about rights abuses and restrictions on civil liberties, calling for the protection of their basic rights, freedom of expression and an end to political repression. Additionally, economic development is a major issue, with calls for better opportunities, improved infrastructure, healthcare and education, along with increased investment to drive regional growth. But can India intervene in PoK matters and reintegrate it in our territory is another question. Unfortunately, such statements often cross borders and have unintended ramifications on the other side. Domestically, it may serve to galvanise the party's core supporters and assert the BJP's strong stance on national security and territorial integrity. It is also likely to influence electoral dynamics, with the party hoping to leverage this narrative to bolster its performance in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections. Internationally, these statements may further strain India-Pakistan relations, potentially escalating tensions in an already volatile region. The call for international intervention on human rights grounds adds a new dimension to the discourse, potentially inviting global scrutiny and diplomatic engagements which India has been avoiding ever since this issue started. These remarks are more driven by poll expediency and election rhetoric rather than the Government's stated policy. These statements could exacerbate regional tensions and complicate diplomatic efforts.

PICTALK



People show their inked finger after casting their vote during the fifth phase of Lok Sabha elections, in Ladakh

Communal friction must end now



PRAFULL GORADIA

Despite facing criticism, Modi's tenure has seen minimal communal clashes, emphasising the importance of mutual understanding for communal harmony

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the hectic campaigning for the current Lok Sabha elections has asked the Muslim community to seriously introspect; he has also exposed the Congress of endlessly pampering their notions of separateness. As expected, he has been pilloried for doing some blunt speaking.

No honest political observer can deny that Prime Minister Modi's administration has been free of communal clashes, except the Delhi riots of 2020. Earlier, this used to be a regular feature. The only other communal clashes have been over the abduction of cows. Hindus detest the killing of cows and oxen. In the 16th century, the Mughal emperor Akbar banned the killing of cows, because it offended Hindu sentiments.

In the 20th century, the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind, founded by Maulana Azad advised Muslims to avoid killing cows as it offends Hindus. An unwritten clause of the Partition of India was that those Muslims who wanted to stay back in post-Partition India shouldn't do anything to offend Hindu sentiments. Qaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah had clearly stated in his Lahore speech of March 22, 1940, that "Hindus and Muslims are very different and cannot exist in the same country". Dr BR Ambedkar endorsed this view in his 1941 book Thoughts on Pakistan that an exchange of population should be organized on the Turko-Greek lines in 1923, under the auspices of the League of Nations. Jinnah, Ambedkar and Dr Rajendra Prasad endorsed this view. Rajendra Babu, India's President from 1950 to 1960, had written India Divided, wherein he proposed that Muslims who couldn't emigrate to Pakistan could be specially permitted to stay back, not as citizens but as aliens with visas.

Jinnah and other League functionaries in 1946 and 1947, had repeatedly demanded an exchange of population. Their views were published in the Dawn, newspaper Jinnah (now published in Karachi but initially printed in Delhi). Sir Feroze Khan Noon, later Pakistan's first prime minister, threatened in



April 1946 that if Hindus took an obstructive attitude to population exchange, Muslims would re-enact the murderous orgies of Genghis and Halaqu Khan. Iftikhar Husain, the Nawab of Mamdot, in December 1946 said he supported an exchange of population because many Muslims wanted to settle in Sindh. Ismail Chundrigar, later Pakistan's sixth prime minister, said that the British had no right to hand over Muslims to a subject people over whom they had ruled for 500 years. Shaukat Hayat Khan, son of Sikandar Hayat Khan, said the exchange of population was an integral part of the demand for Pakistan. Ismail Mohammed, a Muslim Leaguer from Madras said that Muslims were in the middle of a jihad. Similar were the views of Raja Ghazanfar Ali, who was later Pakistan's food, agriculture and health minister.

To the extent that Professor M Mujeeb, Vice-Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi met the Turkish representatives to the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (UNO), the latter was surprised and asked Mujeeb, "How are you representing India? I thought all Muslims went away to Pakistan". The point here is that all



THE INCUMBENT GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN BOLD ENOUGH TO BRING IN SOME REFORMS, HOWEVER LIMITED. INSTANT VERBAL DIVORCE HAS BEEN ABOLISHED AND EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES AND INITIATIVES HAVE BEEN EXPANDED TO INCLUDE MUSLIM GIRLS

clashes or friction between the two communities ought to have been put finally at rest. They would have been so but for the insertion of Articles 25 to 30 into the Constitution of India by the Leftist followers of the country's first PM Jawaharlal Nehru. They wanted a substantive vote base for their great leader. This explains why a Uniform Civil Code was made a non-justiciable part of the Constitution. While zamindaris and jagirdaris were abolished, waqfs, which have been nationalized in many Islamic countries, were left untouched. Every other aspect of the separateness of the community's separate identity, like Urdu, polygamy, instant verbal talaq, etc., was not only not touched but continuously pampered. Madrasas, which foster a parallel and obscurantist education system, continue to thrive, preaching sectarianism and schism, to the detriment of their community.

The present Government has been bold to bring in some reforms, however limited. Instant verbal divorce has been abolished and educational facilities and initiatives have been expanded to include Muslim girls. The womenfolk of the community, who have benefitted from these reforms, are being suspected of voting for a Hindu party in these elec-

tions. Islam accords priority to the ummah (community) over the vatan (country). There can be no denying that former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had said that Muslims have "first claim over our national resources" and he would have no hesitation in allotting 15 per cent of resources to them. During his regime, he appointed no less than five commissions to 'enquire' how and why Muslims in India were disadvantaged and what should be done to pull them up.

Qutubuddin Aibak captured Delhi in 1192 AD and thereafter, one Muslim dynasty after another ruled Delhi till 1857, i.e., a total of 665 years before they were erased by the British Crown. With such a long rule, has any Government asked why the community is backward and needs a lift-up? Is taqlid (orthodoxy) in preference to ijihad (re-interpretation) the reason for this? Does the neglect of women also further this state of near-perpetual backwardness? Who is answerable for these crimes of omission? Is the present prime minister, the first Indian leader to ask these uncomfortable questions, in any way answerable for this?

(The writer is a well-known columnist, an author and a former member of the Rajya Sabha; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS PERSIST

Madam — Apropos the news article, "Economic crisis takes a backseat in elections," published on May 20, this is my response. In this dance of democracy, scarce resources are rambling up election tempos. The focus shifts from core issues like employment to distractions like religious and cultural symbols. Despite being touted as the fifth-largest economy, India faces grim realities: high unemployment, displacement due to conflicts in Manipur and agrarian distress. Political promises of increased reservations appear futile without sufficient job creation.

The International Labour Organisation highlights severe forced labour issues, questioning India's progress. With inflation soaring and trade deficits widening, the economic situation remains dire. Public-sector job cuts and reliance on self-employment indicate systemic failures. To truly uplift the marginalised and revitalise the economy, a robust public sector and equitable competition with the private sector are essential. Would politics support such a transformation?

Kunal Singh | Patiala

THE TRUMP SYNDROME

Madam — In US politics, Donald Trump was not the cause of a democratic crisis of faith. He just rode to power on it. Once in control, he leveraged the same disillusionment that helped him into office. Debasing democratic norms and abusing tall institutions led to the subversion of democratic systems. This Trump syndrome of relentless polarisation, which spawns apathy and disconnect in the polity, is seen creeping into nations across the globe to keep the political brew on a boil. Scandals and crises would shake voters' faith in the political system occasionally, but an engineered schism and dysfunction in the polity with agenda-driven governance turned corrosive.

Universally, people feel that democracy is failing because the Governments it produced were unable or unwilling to address their greater concerns. In the ongoing

Combating wildlife trafficking



Apropos the news article, "YouTube happy hunting ground for wildlife traffickers," published on May 20, this is my response. Reading about the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) taking down over 1,100 YouTube videos linked to illegal wildlife trade is both reassuring and deeply concerning. On one hand, it's encouraging to see concerted efforts to tackle this digital menace. However, the sheer volume of such content on a major platform like

YouTube highlights a troubling trend. It's alarming that tech-savvy wildlife traffickers exploit YouTube's vast user base to market and sell protected species, such as parakeets, rare turtles and pangolins. This underscores a significant challenge: the intersection of advanced technology and traditional crime. Despite YouTube's policies against animal abuse, the persistence of these videos suggests enforcement gaps.

The WCCB's proactive steps, involving volunteers and "WILD NET," show progress in wildlife crime control through digital tools. Stronger tech-enforcement collaborations are vital for effective monitoring and policy enforcement. As we applaud the WCCB's efforts, we must also recognise the ongoing battle against a lucrative and persistent illicit wildlife trade that adapts as quickly as we counter it.

Neha Gupta | Delhi

phase of political asphyxiation, the disillusioned electorate is dispirited to defend a system that has failed to champion its cause. Worse, it could be more than ever before that ballots may no longer be the sole guarantee of true democracy. Apathy towards democracy is a gateway to larger unrest.

R Narayanan | Mumbai

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT

Madam — Various things on earth now feel the effect of climate change. Due to climate change, it has been seen that the negative impact on the mental health of people has increased. This research has been published in the journal "Lancet Neurology." Fluctuations in temperature are now affecting brain diseases as well. I recently read in the news that the severity of diseases like cerebral palsy and encephalitis is increasing. Cases of cerebral palsy are also increasing due to the rise in nighttime temperatures. Overall, the scope of climate change is becoming very large. Due to the increase in temperature, various birds and animals have also start-

ed to be affected. It is time for them to go to human settlements for drinking water. All this is happening due to many things. It seems that more than 5 million trees have been cut in India only from 2018 to 2022. This was recently stated in the report "Nature Sustainability." According to this report, most trees have disappeared in Telangana and Maharashtra.

It has come to light that big trees have been cut down to expand agriculture in many areas. The remaining trees are also affected by forest fires and fungal infections. One factor that mitigates overall temperature rise is the current state of the tree. The temperature rise will affect many things and many cities near the sea are also likely to go under water. The increase in temperature should be stopped by humans. Otherwise, it seems that he will have to face many problems and the Government should also take measures for this.

Shantaram Wagh | Pune

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Museums are pillars of culture and education

Museums play an essential role in preserving the history of human civilisation, offering tangible evidence of our existence and activities throughout time



BIJU DHARMAPALAN

Museums play an indispensable part in understanding the history of human civilisation. It is proof of our existence on this planet and material evidence of human activity carried out during our lifetime. Understanding the diverse cultural tapestries that make up human history helps build more inclusive societies. Museums come in various types, each focusing on different aspects of human knowledge, culture and the natural world, like Art museums, history museums, natural history museums, science museums, military and war museums, aviation and space museums, etc. This range of purposes results in a remarkable diversity of museums in terms of their form, content and function.



collections of art and artefacts dedicated to the gods. The word "museum" originates from the Greek "mouseion," a term used to describe a place dedicated to the Muses, the goddesses of the arts and sciences. The concept of the public museum began to take shape in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Many consider the Ashmolean Museum, which opened in 1683 at Oxford University, as the first public museum of its kind. The founding of the British Museum in London in 1753 was a watershed moment in the evolution of museums worldwide. Numerous national museums were founded in the 19th century, frequently serving as emblems of cultural identity and national pride.

The history of museums in India is deeply intertwined with the country's rich cultural and historical legacy. The colonial period saw the estab-

lishment of the first formal museums in India. The British East India Company and other colonial powers began collecting artefacts, often to showcase their conquests and understand local cultures. The Indian Museum in Kolkata, founded in 1814, is the oldest museum in India and one of the earliest in the world. It was established by the Asiatic Society of Bengal and housed collections that ranged from geological to archaeological artefacts. Post-independence, the National Museum under the Ministry of Culture was established in Delhi in 1949. It houses a vast collection of artefacts representing over 5,000 years of Indian history. It was a significant step towards preserving and showcasing India's cultural heritage. To propagate science and develop scientific temper, the National Council of Science Museums (NCSM) was established on April 4, 1978. Today, it administers 26 Science Centres/Museums spread across the country and is considered the world's largest network of science centres/museums.

Museums not only play a vital

role in education and research, serving as repositories of knowledge, culture and history, but also in the conservation and preservation of the region's cultural heritage. Their contributions extend beyond simply displaying artefacts; they provide immersive learning experiences, support scholarly research and engage the public in various educational activities. Museums offer interactive exhibits that engage visitors in hands-on activities. These interactive elements make learning more engaging and memorable, helping visitors, especially children, to grasp complex concepts in science or history through experience. Museums also act as centres of active research. Researchers in archaeology, anthropology, biology and art history rely on museum collections for their studies. Much breathtaking research in science, especially on paleogenomics, was done using the artefacts from museums.

(The writer is an adjunct faculty at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru; views are personal)



A thought for today

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance

CONFUCIUS

Trai Calling Again

Telecom regulator must ask telcos for more data to identify causes for unsatisfactory customer experiences

Trai, India's telecom regulator, faces a regulatory challenge that can be framed as a trilemma. It sets quality of service (QoS) standards for telecom companies. It's measured against user experience to see if there's more tightening needed. Finally, before Trai reaches a decision, it's got to be mindful of the telecom industry's argument that stringent compliance standards will squeeze resources needed to upgrade infrastructure.

The problem | In Aug 2023, Trai invited stakeholder response to its conclusion that despite the rollout of 5G, consumer experience was unsatisfactory. The regulator's background paper on the subject said user experience did not match initial expectations and there were increasing complaints of call drops and low data throughput.

Regulatory framework | Trai frames regulations on QoS for telecom companies. In response to a surge in call drop complaints, it notified QoS standards in 2017 to solve the problem. But it's not working. In 2022, there were about 66 million consumer complaints. Trai said 70% of the complaints were related to faults and network issues.

Also, given the direction in which technology has evolved, Trai is in favour of a single comprehensive regulation to cover both wireless and wireline services. This is on account of convergence of both voice and data into an all-internet protocol architecture.

Pushback | Written responses from the telecom industry were unenthusiastic to ideas floated by Trai. India's 5G rollout is effectively limited to two companies. Ookla, a telecom analytics firm, said India has recorded one of the fastest 5G rollouts in the world. The Indian industry claims to have spent over ₹1L crore on it. In terms of speed, India hasn't fared badly. Ookla's research indicated that in the Oct-Dec 2023 quarter, India's 5G median download speed ranked 14th in the global chart. The upload speed however was significantly slower than market leaders such as Malaysia and South Korea.

Solution | There's a service quality problem in India. Trai has said as much. For sure, it needs to find a balance between competing demands. But that shouldn't prevent it from getting the industry to provide more granular data to identify "dark spots" in performance which get masked by regulatory requirements to submit data at the level of licensed service areas - India has 22 such units. More granular data requirements are a start, a way to identify problems concealed by averages. That's not an unfair compliance burden.



Aim Long Range

Low indigenisation of AK 203 rifles shows Make in India for defence needs much more govt commitment

Good news: the army has started receiving the AK 203 assault rifle produced under an Indo-Russian JV at UP's Korwa in Amethi district, 27,000 units have been delivered so far. Not-so-good news: questions remain about the indigenisation process. The rifles as of today have 25% indigenisation. So, most of the platform is simply being assembled here. True, the contractual terms envisage a phased scaling up of indigenisation to 100%. But the history of development of assault rifles in India leaves one unsure.

Not shooting straight | The AK 203 is supposed to replace the indigenous INSAS rifles inducted in the 1990s. INSAS had several flaws. A multi-calibre assault rifle tender failed to obtain the requisite weapon and was scrapped in 2015. Thereafter, the army tried to source a rifle from the erstwhile Ordnance Factory Board, but that too failed. It was then that the JV for AK 203 was conceptualised to provide over 6.1 lakh rifles under a ₹5,000cr contract.

Delays and snags | But production for the AK 203 was delayed due to costing, payment and sanctions on Russian entities like Rosoboron-export, which is part of the AK 203 JV. This led to supply chain snags. The delays forced govt to go for urgent purchase of 72,000 American SIG 716 rifles, even though such imports had been banned under the Positive Indigenisation List.

A long haul | These snags need to be addressed. Indigenisation of defence production, a strategic objective, will also have immense spillover effects for civilian sectors. Think US's military-industrial complex and the web of arms manufactures and technology providers. This is why govt must hand-hold defence indigenisation for the long haul, just as initial govt investments made India a major global automobile ancillaries player, accounting for 2.3% of India's GDP. For self-sufficiency, strategic autonomy and reducing defence import bills, GOI's domestic defence production push must continue.



I Am Fed Up @co.in

Everyone's tech-tolerance hits its limit at some point

Chitra Phadnis

How much technology can human beings handle, before they give up in despair? When do people hit their personal 'thus-far-and-no-further' moment? Did that awakening happen when they faced the horror of never returning to the bank to get their passbook updated, or did they last until it came to letting Alexa into their homes, or will it be when they find out that AI has slipped in uninvited?

It is age, gender, occupation, the century you live in that determines this limit, or is it none of the above? Long back, there probably was a human who refused to use a wheel. 'Unnecessary contraption,' he must have grumbled. 'Our ancestors were fine using their legs, weren't they?' At this rate, we will forget how to walk.

I think I breached my personal tech threshold when I went with a group of over-50 friends to a new age café the other day. It felt like alien land. Young people with laptops sat in small groups in complete silence. The zombies occasionally came to life to ask for another coffee or a spoon or something by bending their heads first to one side and then to the other and removing their ear pods.

Then they went back to typing very fast with their thumbs. This must be some kind of an evolutionary ability, because humans aged over 40 years can only type with one forefinger. Those over 75 can type with 10 fingers though. Our waiter, who also looked as if he graduated high school after Covid, informed us that they didn't have a physical menu. Of the 12 of us, four groaned loudly and two sighed dramatically, while six rose to the occasion and pulled out their phones. Four of the valiant actually managed to scan and download the menu. At that point, two of us had to concede defeat - we had forgotten to get reading glasses and no amount of squinting at the phone screen helped.

So that left two women to read out the options (multiple times) to the rest, get the other 10 women's preferences, add up the numbers and log it into the system. To cut a long story short, many chaotic minutes later our waiter came up with a truly innovative solution. He brought a pencil and pad to take down our orders. He had found the answer blowing in the wind.



Only Wave Is The Heatwave

Coast to coast, cutting across Andhra, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra, local issues are driving the chatter & the voter. That makes for interesting poll outcomes

Ruchir Sharma



Modi knows how to create waves. Ten years ago, he led BJP to the first outright parliamentary majority India had seen in three decades. Five years later he turned that narrow majority into a more decisive one, on a surge of support amid tensions with Pakistan. So when PM, his party and the polls started predicting another big win this year, few doubted the coming third wave. I certainly didn't.

Then I hit the campaign trail, alongside a group of 20 media colleagues with whom I have covered more than 30 national and state elections over the last 25 years. This time we tracked the campaign from the east coast to the west, traversing Andhra, Telangana, Karnataka and Maharashtra. And as is often the case, conventional wisdom didn't survive the road reality test. Nowhere on this 2,000km, eight-day route did we hear sounds of a wave.

We heard no backlash against Modi either. Just a return to an India before Modi manias, focused on local issues and leaders - with events in New Delhi an afterthought. The urban middle-class stir with pride at Modi's base case for a third term - that a roaring economy is raising India's global stature. But many rural voters do not.

Despite a doubling of subsidies for the poor under Modi, they still speak of daily distress from rising food prices and of the urgent need for more govt relief. Yes, the administration has built many a gleaming new expressway, but each one is matched by such a chaos of urban development that we managed an average speed of just 50km an hour between cities - same as a quarter century ago.

Our trip started in Andhra where voters didn't even mention the PM unless prompted. At a Modi rally in the city of Rajahmundry, they gave a bigger welcome to his ally Pawan Kalyan - a regional film star who launched his own party. There's often a set of rally-goers who come just to see celebrities land in their helicopters, and some left after hearing Kalyan deliver a rousing speech in Telugu. Modi had to be translated from Hindi, his words seeming to melt in oppressive mid-afternoon sun before reaching the crowd. The only wave we could feel was the heatwave.

Voters spoke mainly of the two dominant Andhra politicians: CM Jagan Reddy, seen as the welfare

candidate, and Chandrababu Naidu, the development man. A former chief secretary of the state went so far as to say that the AP contest was shaping up as an intensely local "class war," pitting rich against poor, in which national politics are no longer relevant.

Three days later we reached Hyderabad, Telangana's

Parties and voters are often driven by pure self-interest. By one count, nearly one in four BJP candidates nationwide are new recruits from rival parties - no prior commitment to its Hindutva ideology required.

The second half of our trip took us briefly to Karnataka, where freshly whitewashed homes and wide roads speak to rising prosperity, then into Maharashtra, where cratered state highways reflect its stagnation. Once the second richest state by per capita income, Maharashtra has now fallen out of the top 10. While its decline continues, Karnataka and Telangana have shot up, both gaining more than a dozen places over the past decade and now rank third and second, respectively.

Local conditions create the local mood. A chamber of commerce rep in the small city of Solapur told us industry in Maharashtra is so thin and jobs so few that young people are emigrating by thousands, leaving behind "a village of retired people". The issues here are particularly gritty, like suicides among farmers, struggling to export their onions and pomegranates.

More than in other states, voters here spoke of BJP as overaggressive, overambitious. They muttered BJP "broke" two regional parties by using financial incentives or threats to steal away local candidates. Uddhav Thackeray and his son Aditya repeated to us what they now tell voters: that Maharashtra is in decline because Modi's favour development in his home state, neighbouring Gujarat.

The upshot of all this is that BJP and its allies could lose ground in the west and witness some churn in the south. Most non-partisan observers we spoke with thought that, in contrast to the 2019 sweep for NDA, the two leading coalitions could split the seats in Maharashtra this time. In Karnataka, too, buzz was of Congress winning 10 odd seats, after the rout in the 2019 election. In Andhra, NDA prospects rest almost entirely on its regional coalition partners. Good news for BJP in these four states was from Telangana, where the party appears likely to gain at BRS's expense.

India remains an amalgam of diverse states, tough even for the most charismatic of strongmen to dominate completely. Though Modi is still likely to return for a third term, he could fall short of the hype. If BJP wins by a smaller margin this time, fears that Modi and his party are growing too powerful, threatening Indian democracy, will fade. Talk of how they can govern with a diminished mandate will begin.

The writer is an author and global investor



Uday Deb

capital, where Congress CM Revanth Reddy said he is under pressure after only six months in office because the country is in the grip of "Swiggy" politics - referencing the popular food-delivery app. Campaign managers told us candidates are spending up to \$15m per constituency, which implies total spending of more than \$1b to win the more prosperous southern states; in return voters expect instant delivery of public benefits.

The global conversation about India dwells on ideology and Modi's brand of Hindu nationalism, missing the increasingly transactional quality of Indian politics; as Reddy told us: "Ideology is for libraries."

POLLITICS Special Series on Elections

Raisi Is Dead, Long Live Raisi's Policies

Iran president's demise is unlikely to shake up the regime because Iranian elite's interests lie in maintaining status quo. This includes foreign affairs

Aydin Sezer



The death of any country's president and foreign minister in a helicopter crash would make headlines around the world. But in the case of Iran's Ebrahim Raisi and Hossein Amir Abdollahian, there is an additional complexity.

While official statements have been presenting the helicopter crash as the result of a technical accident, a very different assessment is gaining ground in Iran's conspiratorial political culture - that this was an assassination rather than accident.

The succession battle | In either case, Raisi's death is bound to have a major impact on Iran's domestic politics, more precisely its ruling elite. He was one of the strongest candidates to replace the country's second Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who is 85 years old, and whose son Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei is the other one said to be in the running.

Thus, Raisi's death can be expected to create a succession crisis for the supreme leadership in Iran. It could raise questions about the legitimacy of Mojtaba's elevation if he is appointed as the next supreme leader. This could mean that the new supreme leader will depend on Revolutionary Guards to maintain internal order and status quo. And this in turn could mean the regime taking an even more repressive turn.

But for the people who oppose the regime, does it really matter that Raisi has died and someone else will be Khamenei's successor? Not really. For the regime remains the regime.

The mourning period | In the short term, something else comes to the fore. As long as this continues to have the approval of Khamenei, the country's administration will now pass into the hands of Mohammad Mokhber, the first vice president. He has been appointed as the

acting president and is supposed to lead the country to elections within 50 days. The priority for Iran's political elite is this: who will be the next president?

The Iranian leadership will use these 50 days as a period of mourning, even exaggerated mourning. Once a new president is elected and the mourning period is over, the country will again focus on domestic political balances. In other words, Raisi's death is not a development that could lead to the sudden unravelling of the current regime in Iran. At least in the short to medium term, and barring new and game-changing developments.

Whether to give credence to conspiracy theories is another matter. We will be looking for clues about the true cause of the helicopter crash in what developments take place in Iranian domestic and regional politics in the coming days. But for now it is more important to monitor Iran's domestic politics, rather than its foreign policy and its strategies towards West Asia.

The Gaza status quo | Will we see a hardening of Iran's policy with respect to Israel's military operations in Gaza? Iran may indeed instrumentalise its foreign policy to ensure the consolidation of the regime at home. If it believes that unity and cohesion in society can be achieved in this way, we can expect it to pursue a more radical policy, although this looks unlikely in Iran's current economic situation. It could also take even more controversial

positions on the international stage. But in a circular way, such a hardline foreign policy could produce results that would further accelerate domestic political churn. So, the political elite need to pursue a balanced policy.

Also, how far can Iran go in its policy towards Israel? To the stage of going to war? That is unlikely. Iran is already doing what it can within its capacity. Let's remember that Raisi, from the beginning, was a staunch defender of the Islamic revolution in Iran and was popularly known as the lord of execution.

The Azerbaijan question | It is also noteworthy that the helicopter crash took place right after Raisi attended a dam inauguration with Azerbaijani President Aliyev. Iran's neighbour Azerbaijan enjoys strategic cooperation with Israel and openly supports Israel in its Gaza operations. For a long time, Iran has been more supportive of Armenia in the tension between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Raisi and Aliyev attending a ceremony together sent messages of détente.

It is safe to say that Iran's political elite, who continue to argue for a hardline policy towards Azerbaijan, are not happy with these softening steps taken by Raisi. Azerbaijani Turks make up about 40% of Iran's 90 million population, which is an extremely sensitive situation. Overall, in this transitional period, the domestic politics in Iran needs careful monitoring.

The writer is a former Turkish diplomat and political analyst



Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.

Martin Luther King Jr

Embracing Trusteeship & Generosity For A Just Society

Ramesh Bijlani

Spirituality is often equated with love for poverty. Therefore, it may come as a surprise to many that Sri Aurobindo has considered money as "the visible sign of a universal force". As in other spheres, so in that of making money, some of us are specially gifted, and can therefore earn much more than we need.

Sri Aurobindo, in a letter to his wife, once wrote that he would consider himself a thief if he kept more money than he needed. Somewhat along similar lines, says Krishn in the Gita, "Postured by sacrifice, the gods shall give you desired enjoyments, who enjoys their given enjoyments and has not given to them, he is a thief (3:12)." The eternal truths hidden in these words are that the enjoyments have been given to us; the enjoyments received are rooted in

the principle of sacrifice, the principle of give and take, the principle of recycling; enjoying, or taking, what has been given to us without giving, is a theft. These ideals are difficult to practise. For practice, spiritual teachers, Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, and Gandhiji included, have advised following the principle of trusteeship.

We do not own the wealth we have earned; we have been entrusted with putting it to proper use. Hence, those who have been blessed with plenty should share their wealth with those who have been cursed with scarcity. Since the current average level of human consciousness translates into an ego-driven personality, trusteeship, often, finds only a truncated expression in charity. But, according to the Mother, charity is an acknowledgement of the

human inability to establish justice on earth. That charity fails to establish justice is known even to those who give in charity. But they still give to appease their conscience. While charity is voluntary, taxation is not. Taxation on income and wealth is enforced charity. However, neither charity nor taxation achieve justice. Superfluous wealth continues to exist, and poverty persists despite both.

One reason why many who grow rich choose to die rich is because of the possibility of inheritance. Inheritance is also responsible for attempts to make money, and to hoard money, using unethical methods. That is why, the Mother has said that money should not belong to individuals; as the first step towards that goal, inheritance should be abolished. However, our conditioning about the

legitimacy of inheritance is so strong that even those who are otherwise sincerely on the spiritual path are often unwilling, or lack the courage, to will their wealth for general good. By design or default, they leave much of their wealth at the disposal of their legal heirs. One practical solution to the dilemma is to give generously while one is still alive. The other solution would be that the children who inherit share generously what they inherit. The legal solution to the imbalance is inheritance tax. None of these will abolish inequality.

Eradication of all evils, including inequality and injustice, has to wait for the average level of human consciousness to rise, which in turn will change typical human nature. The change has begun, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have assured us that the day is not far when human life will be guided not by the separative ego but by love rooted in a sense of oneness.



THE SPEAKING TREE