

Recharging e-two-wheelers

New policy may force the industry to live without subsidies

The much-awaited successor to the second edition of Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric (and Hybrid) Vehicles, or FAME II, has caught the e-two-wheeler industry by surprise. Under the Electric Mobility Promotion Scheme (EMPS), the government has halved the subsidy on e-two-wheelers, limited the number of vehicles it will cover, and restricted the duration of the scheme to four months — from April 1 to July 31. Though the industry had expected a rollback of sorts, the EMPS suggests the government has hit the brakes harder and earlier than expected. Under the EMPS, the subsidy on electric two-wheelers has been halved to ₹5,000 per kilowatt hour with a maximum of ₹10,000 per vehicle. The new policy also introduced a quota system of 333,387 e-two-wheelers. For the government, the EMPS will entail an outlay of ₹500 crore from ₹10,000 crore under FAME II. The abruptness with which the government has cut back on subsidies and the industry's dismayed response point to the problematic nature of the electric-vehicle (EV) business in India.

A little over a week after the EMPS was announced, major e-two-wheeler manufacturers met senior officials of the Ministry of Heavy Industries, pointing to losses of over ₹300 crore as a result of the new terms. Their complaints are valid, in that the new scheme omits from its ambit thousands of vehicles under manufacture, in bonded warehouses or dealer showrooms. Selling inventories without the benefit of the steep discounts available under FAME II will be difficult. There are complaints, too, of the red tape involved, with manufacturers required to re-register themselves, dealers, and vehicles to be eligible for the EMPS. The old complaints about delays in subsidy approval were also reiterated. These grievances are justified but, if anything, they highlight the need for EV manufacturers to learn to live without the crutch of subsidies, which were significantly raised between FAME I (2015-19, ₹895 crore) and FAME II (2019-24, ₹10,000 crore). Indeed, the cutback should not have come as a surprise, given the adjustments announced in the FAME II programme in May last year — a reduction of the per vehicle subsidy and penalising manufacturers who violated local sourcing norms. In that sense, the EMPS can be viewed as a means of reducing that dependence sooner rather than later, though a more moderate glide path may have been a better route.

The fact is that purchase subsidies alone may not have been the advisable path to a faster adoption of EVs. Nine years since the first FAME scheme was announced, e-two-wheelers account for only 5 per cent of all two-wheeler sales, some distance from the target of 30 per cent of EVs by 2030 to meet clean air objectives (for cars, the share is even lower at 2 per cent). The absence of a charging ecosystem has also been a major constraint, a fact the government belatedly understood by sanctioning ₹800 crore under FAME II for public-sector units to set up 7,500 charging points across the country, a number that is still inadequate. This is the route China followed, by steadily reducing vehicle-purchase support (now fully withdrawn) and purchase-tax incentives each year from 2009 onwards and simultaneously expanding charging infrastructure. This has enabled manufacturers to wean themselves off subsidies and become formidable challengers in the global EV market.

Inflationary pressure

Fiscal expansion increased inflation in the developed world

It's been over four years since the pandemic began spreading across the world. The first lockdown in India was imposed on March 24, 2020. Restrictions on mobility in practically every part of the world to contain the spread of the virus severely impacted output and employment. As a result, governments and central banks adopted policies to support economic activities and minimise the damage. An improved understanding of the virus and quick availability of vaccines at scale helped revive economic activities. Global recovery from the pandemic has been far stronger and more resilient than initially anticipated, partly because of the strong performance of the US economy. The Indian economy has also recovered strongly and is projected to post a 7 per cent-plus growth rate for the third consecutive year in 2023-24. However, robust output recovery was accompanied by high global inflation, increasing economic risks.

When the inflation rate started inching up in the initial phase of the recovery, central banks, particularly in the advanced economies, treated it as a temporary phenomenon emanating mainly from supply-chain disruption during the pandemic. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 further disturbed supply chains and pushed up the inflation rate. Consequently, large central banks, including the US Federal Reserve, started increasing interest rates. By mid-2022, the inflation rate was nearing the double-digit mark in the US. This led to the fastest increase in policy rates by large central banks in decades, resulting in significant volatility in financial markets. While supply-side disruption was indeed one of the reasons for the sharp increase in inflation rates, it is argued that aggressive stimulus in different parts of the world during the pandemic also played a part. New research by economists at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), published in its latest monthly bulletin, looks into this aspect and can be useful for future policy management.

Notably, policy responses to the pandemic varied significantly across the world. Advanced economies accounted for nearly 80 per cent of global fiscal response, which was directed mainly towards direct transfers to individuals and families in different forms. Strong fiscal support also enabled faster economic recovery. The RBI study of 13 countries, including India, showed the relationship between fiscal intervention and inflation to be stronger and more visible in the post-pandemic period. Thus, countries with a larger fiscal stimulus witnessed higher increases in inflation rates and those with moderate support witnessed moderate inflation outcomes. Fiscal support in India was relatively limited and targeted. Although inflation in India remained elevated during the recovery phase, the increase was not as sharp as in the developed world, partly because it was on the higher side in India even before the pandemic.

It is argued that the fiscal deficit will be inflationary in India only if it is at full employment, or when there are supply bottlenecks in certain sectors. While the core inflation rate in India moderated significantly and is close to the target, supply-side issues, particularly in the food basket, have kept the inflation rate up. Nonetheless, the result of the study underlines the importance of measured fiscal intervention and timely reversal. The fiscal policy in India is focusing on capital expenditure to support growth. While India needs large investment in infrastructure, a low and stable fiscal deficit will help support the objective of sustainable growth with price stability.

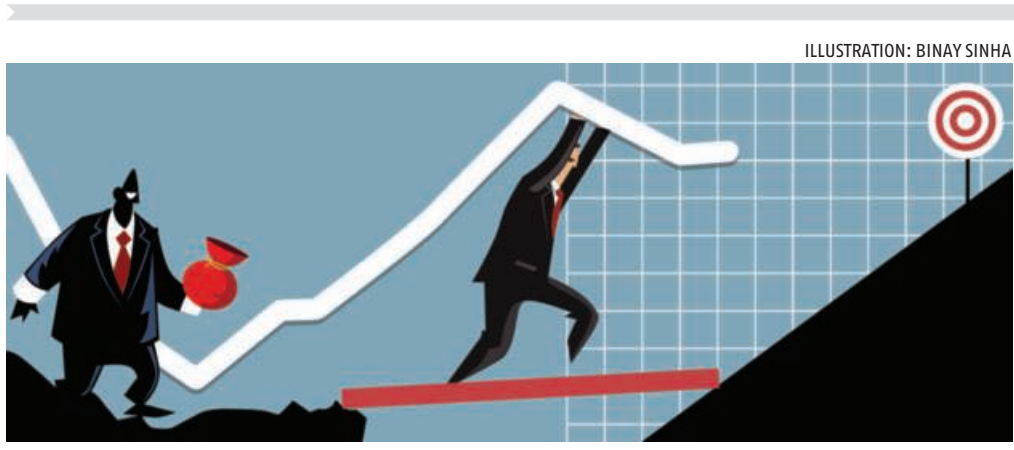


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Where is the debt?

Robust equity markets are not enough to kickstart a private sector capex cycle. India needs easily accessible debt financing

Everyone is celebrating the India growth story. With the real gross domestic product (GDP) growth number now crossing 8 per cent, it stands out. Most investors now buy into the notion that in the coming decade India will deliver real GDP growth of between 6.5 and 8 per cent for the full decade. The perceived predictability and stability of this growth is one of the reasons why India's valuation multiples are at the high end of their history. This growth path is critical to creating enough jobs and becoming comfortable with our internal debt dynamics. For the markets also, this matters, as this trajectory implies 11-13 per cent nominal GDP growth, which has historically been a reasonable predictor of corporate earnings.

When discussing the India growth story, the only chink in the armour seems to be private capital expenditure or capex. The government has done a great job boosting public investment, but significant follow-through from the private sector is yet to be seen. The popular narrative is that without acceleration in private sector capital expenditure the India growth story cannot sustain.

First, some numbers. When the Narendra Modi government came to power, public investment was approximately ₹2.3 trillion. This number moved up to only about ₹3.2 trillion in his first term. It was only in the second term that this number really accelerated, rising from approximately ₹3.2 trillion to about ₹11 trillion (FY25). As an example of public investment, just look at the railways, its capex budget has gone up 16 times in the last 10 years, from approximately ₹15,000 crore to ₹2.5 trillion. A similar trend is observed for roads, where investment has gone up nine times to ₹3 trillion. Gross fixed capital formation has once again crossed 30 per cent, after dipping to 27 per cent, with aspirations to take this figure to 32-33 per cent.

This is all fine, and it is a good narrative showing the step change in both the aspiration and execution ability of the government. This has to sustain and, hopefully, it will.

The reason everyone worries about the private sector's role in stepping up its investments is the plateauing of public investments. From here on, we cannot expect public investment to keep growing at the scorching pace of the last few years. There are multiple reasons for this. First, with a fiscal adjustment agenda, targeting a fiscal deficit of below 4.5 per cent by FY26 and subsequently even lower, there is limited scope to keep increasing public investment by more than 10-15 per cent per annum.

Additionally, there's an issue of absorptive capacity. I don't think, for example, the railways' capital spending can keep compounding. To even spend ₹2.5 trillion per annum effectively is not easy; it requires huge organisational design changes and empowerment. Not every government department or company can make these changes. Even in the case of national highways, although the yearly construction has increased to between 10,000 and 10,500 kms, it has been stuck at this high level for the last five years. We may not be able to accelerate much from here. Again an absorptive capacity issue.

Given the above, the private sector has to now play its part. Contrary to the sceptics, there are indications the private sector will join the party. I have not had a single conversation with a large corporate in the last six months, where capacity addition was not brought up. Every company wants to add capacity, and is targeting global scale. Most have a strong balance sheet to fund these ambitions. Take, for instance, the recent announcements from top groups like the Tatas in semi-conductors (over \$13 billion investment), JSW in steel



AKASH PRAKASH

Tale of two crossovers

On February 9, when Santrupt Misra announced he was formally joining the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) as its national spokesperson, there was intense speculation that the Aditya Birla group veteran may be nominated to the Rajya Sabha. That eventually proved to be untrue. But now, there is a distinct possibility that the party may field him as a candidate for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. With the elections barely three weeks away, a final decision could be imminent.

In the Pauri Garhwal Lok Sabha constituency, Manish Khanduri has his hands full, campaigning for a new local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate there. Even till two weeks ago, Mr Khanduri seemed all set to bag a Congress ticket from the same constituency, until he resigned for personal reasons and decided to hitch his bandwagon with the BJP. He did not ask for a party ticket from the BJP. None was offered either, except perhaps for an organisational role in the party in Delhi in the future.

The news of Mr Khanduri's resignation from the Congress was greeted with a deep sense of disappointment among our journalist community, particularly among those of us who had worked closely with him, including starting our careers at this very paper in the early nineties.

Dr Misra and Mr Khanduri's political journeys can't obviously be compared. Dr Misra is a stalwart from the corporate world with an outstanding track record of transformation. Mr Khanduri, on the other hand, took the plunge into politics in 2019, after a successful career — first as a business journalist and later, armed with a MBA degree from Kellogg, as a senior business executive in global media companies like CNN and Meta.

So what's the upshot? Shortly after he announced his transition, Dr Misra faced a whole barrage of questions from peers in the corporate world. They wanted

to know what it would take to shift to public life. That's not surprising, given that corporate life can appear shallow and unfulfilling after a certain point.

There is a perceived thrill in making a bigger impact at a national level. So what's holding back people? Most middle class Indians tend to carry a dim view of politics. I keep hearing the refrain that India needs more upright, ethical corporate leaders to join politics in order to have a better chance of cleansing itself of corruption and fostering a resurgent future. Of course, it is another matter that most people would prefer that someone else take the risk of jumping into public life, rather than doing it themselves. A few

though have the intent and are serious, but walking away from the status, the position and money is seldom easy. Both Mr Khanduri and Dr Misra had a family background in politics when they were young. Mr Khanduri campaigned for his father Major General B C Khanduri, who served as a minister in the Vajpayee government, and had a squeaky clean reputation of building the Golden Quadrilateral project. He also served as a BJP chief minister of Uttarakhand.

Dr Misra's family, too, was deeply involved in public life. His father's elder brother was a leading trade unionist, affiliated to the Communist Party of India. He himself fought union elections as a young student. His decision to join the BJD was delayed by more than a decade, when his corporate commitments did not allow him to make the leap, once in 2013 and again in 2019.

Mr Khanduri hoped to use his father's goodwill to build his political base. But in 2019, he lost the Lok Sabha elections on a Congress ticket. That didn't deter him. And he doggedly continued his on-ground work and also helming a key communications role during Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra,



INDRAJIT GUPTA

Two is company



BOOK REVIEW

NUPUR PAVAN BANG

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest, a non-fiction book titled *An Uncommon Love: The Early Life of Sudha and Narayana Murthy*, unveils the captivating narrative of two eminent figures, Sudha Murthy and NR Narayana Murthy. It offers an exploration of their formative years. Ms Divakaruni's adept narrative style, characterised by poetic simplicity and robust character portrayals, particularly resonates with aficionados of profound storytelling.

Departing from the world of mythological heroines, the book unfolds the ordinary yet remarkable lives of the Murthys before the establishment of Infosys, portraying their journey as an allegorical epic awaiting narration.

Vividly depicted are the everyday trials and triumphs of a working couple, encapsulating the essence of support, sacrifice, and solidarity, compelling readers to root for their success.

Their story reminded me of the scenes from Basu Chatterjee's 1976 classic *Chhoti Si Baat*, starring Amol Palekar and Vidya Sinha. A simple boy, in love with a simple cotton saree-clad girl. Enjoying small things such as holding hands, walking on the roads, and eating at Poona Coffee House. "With her [Sudha] by his [Narayana] side, he felt he could take on even the toughest challenges".

You want them to succeed. You cheer for them. You feel for them. Sudha Murthy and Narayana Murthy's early life experiences together are relatable and Ms Divakaruni captures them in the most endearing manner.

The narrative poignantly addresses the dilemma faced by individuals who find themselves overshadowed or relegated to supporting roles, despite possessing substantial capabilities and accomplishments — a sentiment to

which Sudha Murthy's journey lends credence. It would have been easy to portray Ms Murthy as the victim, as someone who had to give up her career to support her husband's passion, and it would have been largely true. However, it would do grave injustice to Ms Murthy's resilience and commitment to personal growth, exemplified through her writings, contributions to the Infosys Foundation, and her subsequent foray into public service (her recent nomination to the Rajya Sabha being a reward for these achievements). Ms Divakaruni maintains a fine balance that never lets Ms Murthy's character slide into being inconsequential. Rather she serves as a beacon of inspiration.

Another aspect that touched a chord with me was the challenge of imparting values amidst prosperity, as Ms Murthy navigates the complexities of instilling humility and "living within one's means and not trying to keep up with the "neighbours"...the importance of being practical in matters of spending, recognising wasteful behaviour, and getting good value for your money" in her children. This segment will resonate deeply with individuals who have experienced economic scarcity and now grapple with the task of nurturing

similar sensibilities in their offspring.

On the professional development side of the couple, of notable significance is the portrayal of Mr Murthy's evolution from a socialist idealist to a compassionate capitalist, alongside the inception of Infosys, underscoring the fervour, altruism, and perseverance that culminated in its establishment.

Unlike conventional biographies of business luminaries, which frequently overlook the intricacies of personal challenges and emotions, Ms Divakaruni's portrayal transcends superficiality, reveals the interplay of relationships among its seven founders, and elucidates the philosophical underpinnings of the compassionate capitalism intrinsic to Infosys's corporate ethos. Furthermore, the narrative sheds light on Ms Murthy's sacrifices and her steadfast support of Narayana Murthy's endeavours, emblematic of the pivotal roles spouses play in each other's professional pursuits.

The exemplary financial stewardship demonstrated by the couple underscores a vital lesson for start-up founders and business owners: The importance of judiciously managing company and investor funds. In an environment rife with instances of poor companies-rich promoters, the Sudha Murthy and Narayana Murthy's narrative serves as a beacon of integrity

and foresight, illustrating the enduring value of principled financial management for long-term sustainability. By assimilating these invaluable insights, aspiring entrepreneurs can play a pivotal role in cultivating a culture of accountability and integrity within India's corporate landscape, thus fostering a legacy of responsible entrepreneurship and sustainable growth.

I am reminded of an incident when I accompanied my brother to the optician, a family friend, shortly after his graduation from an Indian Institute

of Technology. On learning of my brother's employment in a multinational corporation, the optician remarked, "We heard so much about you. That you are so good in studies and all. And you still didn't get a job in Infosys?"

This anecdote encapsulates the profound impact of Infosys on the national consciousness. It was a pleasure to delve into the lives of this extraordinary couple, whose visionary leadership catalysed the information technology wave in the country, capturing the imagination of a nation and leaving an indelible mark on the annals of Indian business history.

An Uncommon Love is a testament to Ms Divakaruni's narrative prowess and her ability to unravel the complexities of human experience. Through meticulous storytelling and emotional depth, the book illuminates the transformative journey of two icons, offering readers a compelling narrative of love, sacrifice, and resilience amidst the backdrop of nascent entrepreneurship in India.

The reviewer is the academic director, Thomas Schmidheiny Centre for Family Enterprise, Indian School of Business

The writer is with Amansa Capital

The writer is co-founder at Founding Fuel Publishing



AN UNCOMMON LOVE: The Early Life of Sudha and Narayana Murthy
Author: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni
Publisher: Juggernaut Books
Pages: 352
Price: ₹799

Opinion

MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2024



INDIA'S GROWTH STORY

Vice president Jagdeep Dhankar

Recent years have been a testament to India's journey from fragile five economies in the world. We had the good fortune to be in the big five leaving behind Canada, UK and France

Another 'Maruti moment'?

JSW wants to create one with its EVs, but it's going to be a long, rough ride ahead

JSW GROUP, ONE of the country's top business houses with a strong presence in steel, energy, infrastructure, cement, and paints, has ventured into the passenger vehicle segment. The company has partnered with China's MG Motor, which already has a presence in India, and the duo plan to sell one million electric passenger vehicles by 2030 and have a market share of 33%. Sounding euphoric and ambitious, JSW Group chairman Sajjan Jindal, while announcing the plans for the auto venture, said that JSW MG Motor will create a "Maruti moment" in the EV space. As is well known, in 1983, Maruti changed the face of the domestic auto industry by bringing lightweight and efficient cars, which sent incumbents—Ambassador and Fiat—into oblivion. Today, Maruti has a market share of around 50% in the passenger vehicle segment. Jindal's plan is to build scale by launching an EV every 3-4 months beginning September. It wants to disrupt the market in the EV space, which is a nascent segment at present, and create the Maruti moment of the 1980s.

There is nothing wrong in being ambitious and Jindal has an impeccable track record. However, is there really a room to create a "Maruti moment" in this day and age? Way back in 1981, when Maruti was born, the annual sales of cars in India was stagnating at less than 40,000 units, with the presence of only two manufacturers. In 2023, Maruti manufactured two million cars and exported over a quarter million. On an overall basis, car sales in FY24 are set to cross the four million-mark, and India today ranks as the world's third largest passenger vehicle market, with all the global players having a presence here.

The share of EVs may still be small, at around 2% of the total PV sales, so technically a 1983-kind of comparison with Maruti can be made. However, the low-share of EVs is not because of a dearth of models—there are around eight models available in the market today, and four launches are in the pipeline. Tata Motors is the largest player with a 73% market share, while M&M has a share of around 5%. The price of the available vehicles range between ₹8 lakh to around ₹26 lakh. Market leader Maruti may not be present in the EV segment today but plans to enter in 2025. The second largest manufacturer, Hyundai Motor, has made a beginning and has chalked out ambitious growth plans.

The market, if not crowded, is well-served, unlike 1983, and it's a buyer's market, not a seller's which was the case in the 80s. Market disruption happens either in terms of price or product, and on both these counts, the ride is not going to be easy for Jindal. The incumbents are vibrant and compete strongly on both the fronts, plus they have an added advantage of an extensive sales and distribution network. Marquee global brands like General Motors and Ford failed in India because they could not match the scale of incumbents in this regard. In the EV space, the big challenge is to create the infrastructure for charging networks. If "Maruti moment" means exhibiting a successful partnership between a local and a global player, certainly, Jindal has a clear field. But if it means disrupting the market, it's going to be a long, tough ride.

● REVVING UP

A COMBINATION OF SHIFTS IN TASTES AND POLICY, WITH GOVERNMENT AID, WILL FUEL THE EV REVOLUTION

EVs will drive us into 2030

IHAVE OFTEN been asked, "What will the EV scene be in 2030?" So I decided to take a trip to the year 2030 and see it for myself. Reports indicate that India sold more than seven million four-wheelers as compared to four million about seven years ago in 2023. This really looks attractive, but not in growth percentage terms. It works out to just around 7%, a rate at which car sales grew in 2023. What seems more attractive is the number of E-4Ws—as EV cars are now commonly called, sold in the country. In 2030, at least 20% of all new vehicles sold are powered by electricity. This means a sale of closer to 1.5 million E-4Ws against a mere 81,000 EVs sold in India in 2023.

The more important point is how it looks on the roads. Are E-4Ws a rare sight? Not at all on city roads. At least half of new vehicles bought in metropolitan centres like Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, Mumbai, and other metros are running on electricity. Even in tier-two and -three cities, EVs are common, as are charging points. Highways in 2030 present enough charging spots. Many of these are fast chargers, offering the option to the EV owner to "refuel" while having coffee and snacks. Almost all shopping malls and public parking spaces in all metro and prominent towns have fast chargers. At least 40% of parking slots in high-rise residential buildings have access to chargers.

It is estimated that more than 80% of electricity generated in India comes from renewable energy sources, which has made the critics crying hoarse on "EV is no less polluting" fall silent. There are many other factors that have changed the perception on E-4Ws since 2023. One important reason is the change in perception of con-

JYOTI MALHOTRA

Managing Director, Volvo Car India
Views are personal



sumers. Vehicles are no more mere mechanical devices taking the passenger from one place to another but have become mobility solutions, with better software, more connectivity, and naturally, more convenience. The range of EVs have gone up and the replacement cost of batteries has fallen down substantially, thanks to the lithium found in Jammu in 2022, which is being commercially mined and put to use.

Clearly there have emerged a new breed of consumers apart from the one who need a vehicle merely for transportation. The younger, tech-savvy generation look for mobility solutions that helps them in their daily chores, bordering on the next phase of autonomous vehicles which are in advanced stages of implementation on many roads. The digital age by 2030 has moved over to the age of Artificial Intelligence. The AI generation understands and uses only EVs for their mobility solutions. India, one among the fastest growing global economies in the last seven years, experienced a shift towards EVs which offer mobility solutions to the aspiring car buyers in an aspiring economy

leading to more upgradations to luxury e-mobility. This shift also meant that our fossil fuel import has gone down substantially and we are now "atmanirbhar" for our energy.

Travelling back in time to 2024, India's passenger car market did not have a better opening than what was recorded in January 2024. Total sales in the first month of the year missed the 400,000 mark by a whisker. Hidden amidst such a record number is an increasing sale of EVs as well—sales in January were 9% higher than the sales in December 2023. But it is still early, judged by the E-4W market data, to state that EV sales have reached the take-off stage. The vehicles sold are mostly in the lower end of the market, indicating larger adoption of EVs in the car rental and taxi segment. In the luxury EV segment, a better indicator of EV adoption, the sales numbers are still modest, though growing.

All the manufacturers dedicated to electrification will continue on this path as pioneers. The doubters will continue to raise issues. But the customers are the kings and queens, and

will opt for an electric car, especially in the luxury segment, offering a range of more than 500 kms. The early users will become brand ambassadors, thereby neutralising hesitation and worry over range per charge by sharing their personal experiences. Charging facilities require long-term investments and need volume for adequate return, as EV sale volumes cannot increase sharply without the spread of fast charging facilities. It is a classic chicken and egg situation and needs the government to come in and untie the knot. Many CPOs have now invested and the spread will widen sharply in 2024 and 2025. By 2030, thanks to proactive policies of governments which opted for tech-savvy mobility solutions for the aspiring generation, fast chargers will be readily available, given that an incremental policy shift takes place in collaboration with industry.

By 2030, EVs on highways will be a common enough sight. I am confident that the proposed plan of placing charging points on Golden Quadrilateral will catch up even on the state highways. The new grids laid out will solve a potential problem of grid collapse arising out of E-4W charging pressure. Fast chargers will be common with slow chargers moving over to residences. The change that is now at a nascent stage will see a major boost in the next phase of India's growth. The tech savvy, environment conscious younger car-buying population in general, and women in particular, will like to enjoy the convenience of driving an EV. Their demand will open the next phase of the automobile boom with matching infrastructure growth. This trend will be most pronounced among the younger luxury car buyers in India.

Aerospace is the canary in the coal mine on safety

IT SEEMS AS if planes are coming apart at the seams in the sky.

United Airlines Holdings Inc. suffered the latest mishap after a ground crew discovered a missing panel on a Boeing 737-800 after the safe landing of a March 15 flight to Medford, Oregon. Also this month, a United plane lost a tire soon after takeoff from San Francisco, and a United flight from Houston to Fort Myers, Florida, made an emergency landing after an engine spewed flames.

Then there was the nosedive of a Boeing 787 during a March 11 Latam Airlines Group SA flight to Auckland from Sydney after the cockpit seat pushed the pilot against the flight controls. These troubling safety issues add to the terrifying Jan. 5 incident in which a door-sized panel blew off a Boeing 737 Max during an Alaska Air Group Inc. flight. The concerns over safety at United Airlines were enough to prompt Chief Executive Officer Scott Kirby this week to call for a review of its safety procedures and training. Airline executives also plan to meet with Boeing board members to discuss the safety issues plaguing the planemaker.

Despite the string of safety concerns, flying remains the safest mode of travel and has been getting safer over time, mainly because of technology such as the terrain awareness and warning systems. Last year, there were no fatal commercial jet airliner crashes, and the number of jet airliner accidents dropped to 94 from 121 the previous year, according to an annual safety report by the Flight Safety Foundation published this month. The average for the previous five years was 116.

Still, there is a widespread assumption that safety and quality control have eroded since the pandemic, and not just in aerospace. Recalls announced by the Consumer Product Safety Commission hit a six-year high in 2023, and Sedgwick, a firm that assists companies with recalls, found they jumped last year among pharmaceutical and food manufacturers, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Dr. Hassan Shahidi, chief executive officer and president of the Flight Safety Foundation, echoed that concern in a March 11 letter that accompanied its report. He warned about complacency as a "stealthy threat that can erode safety and quality unless it is actively countered with a robust safety culture."

The word complacency could easily be swapped with turnover. That's because a large number of workers exited the airline industry during the pandemic when commercial flight activity plummeted. Many experienced employees— from pilot to mechanics—retired early. Others were forced to move on to other jobs, hustling to feed their families and keep their houses. When the airline industry took

off again, there was a worker shortage. New employees had to be hired and trained. More than a third of United's 100,000 workforce consists of employees hired in 2022 and 2023, the company said in its January earnings conference call.

Naturally, safety and quality issues caused by workforce upheaval—if this is the case—would show up first in aerospace, which is the most heavily scrutinized industry on safety and quality. The aerospace supply chain was one of the most severely impacted by the pandemic because the large suppliers are often fed by many small machine shops that make specialized parts at relatively low volume. These small suppliers struggled financially during the downturn and lost veteran workers, making it difficult for them to ramp production back up.

There are signs that quality has become top of mind for companies. A survey of 1,353 global manufacturers last year by Rockwell Automation Inc., which sells gear that controls automation equipment, showed the top goal for digital transformation projects was to raise quality. Increasing automation and forecasting accuracy came in second and third, respectively.

A few companies, including Spirit AeroSystems Holding Inc., GE Aerospace, and Parker Hannifin Corp., have publicly discussed their goals of zero defects. The concept isn't new. It was popularised by Philip Crosby, a quality guru who wrote several books starting with Quality is Free in 1979. That kicked off a continuing debate about whether the zero-defect goal is truly attainable. New tools, such as robotics etc, coupled with artificial intelligence, are helping companies strive toward the goal.

All of that will come in handy. The bedrock for quality and safety, however, will always be a well-trained and experienced workforce.



THOMAS BLACK

Bloomberg



JAYATI GHOSH

Professor of economics, University of Massachusetts Amherst and co-chair, Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation

WHILE THE TECHNICAL details of international agreements may seem arcane or even trivial, they often commit governments to policies that have major economic consequences. This is especially true for low- and middle-income countries, which have long been on the receiving end of unfair treaties.

International tax agreements are a case in point. Bilateral tax treaties are rife with inequalities. They tend to be more advantageous for the home countries of multinational companies (MNCs), diverting much-needed resources from developing to developed countries.

Multilateral agreements are not much better. The OECD's Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS), for example, was supposed to ensure that MNCs could be taxed in countries where they operate (as opposed to shifting profits to low-tax jurisdictions). After nearly eight years of tedious negotiations, however, the process has yielded only modest results: a global minimum corporate tax rate of 15%, well below that of most countries. According to the South Centre, developing economies will derive few gains from this global minimum tax, which will benefit mainly tax havens.

And now, developing countries must decide between two different versions of a subject-to-tax rule (STTR), a provision that will be added to existing tax treaties to combat tax-base erosion and profit shifting. The first is from the OECD, with advanced economies leading discussions as part of the BEPS process, while the second is from the United Nations

Committee of Experts on International Cooperation in Tax Matters (UNTC).

An STTR is an obvious way to eliminate the "double non-taxation" of certain intra-group payments, including interest, royalties, and fees for services. Most tax treaties restrict the source country's right to apply a withholding tax to these payments, which are generally deductible from the payer's business income. This in effect erodes the source tax base. MNCs can then channel this income to affiliates that act as conduits and are resident in a country that applies low or zero taxes to such income and, crucially, is a treaty partner with the source country. Including an STTR in all treaties would allow the source country to tax a recipient of such income if the other country does not tax it at an agreed-upon minimum rate.

This may seem like a straightforward solution, but the devil is in the details. According to the BEPS Monitoring Group's comparison of the two agreements, there are crucial differences regarding the degree of complexity and the scope of taxation rights. The OECD's STTR is complex and limited, applying only to specific types of income and to payments between connected legal persons, which could exclude many services in an increasingly automated world. By contrast, the UNTC's model STTR is simpler and gives significantly broader tax-

Developing countries must decide between two different versions of a subject-to-tax rule (STTR). They must consider the details to choose the better alternative

ing authority to source countries, as it covers all forms of income—including capital gains—regardless of whether it is paid to a related or unrelated entity.

The OECD version further reduces the potential for taxation by requiring thresholds (the UNTC version contains no such requirement). The rules would apply only to connected recipients with aggregate annual covered income of at least €1 million (\$1.1 million) in the jurisdiction, or at least €250,000 if either jurisdiction has a GDP less than €40 billion. It adds a further mark-up threshold, which specifies that the income (other than interest and royalties) must be higher than the direct and indirect costs incurred by the recipient, plus 8.5%. There is no logical—or, indeed, economic—reason for any of these thresholds. They would shrink the tax base and limit revenue potential for the source country, thus serving the interests

of MNCs.

Moreover, the OECD's STTR would be more complicated for tax authorities, because it specifies that collection would occur only in the year following that to which the tax applies, based on tax returns. The UNTC's STTR, however, proposes that the tax could be deductible directly from payments on a current basis. Lastly, the OECD version fixes the minimum tax rate at 9%, taking into account the tax paid by

recipients, whereas the UNTC version leaves the rate open to negotiation between countries.

There is no doubt that the UNTC's model STTR would be easier for developing countries to administer and, more importantly, would enable them to generate more revenue. The choice should be a no-brainer, especially because the provision could eventually become part of the multilateral tax convention that is currently under discussion at the UN.

But despite the UNTC version's obvious advantages, the OECD version is already complete and ready for implementation. And the OECD is anxious to get as many countries as possible to sign on to the proposed multilateral instrument at a ceremony planned for mid-2024. Once again, developing countries are coming under pressure to agree to a treaty that appears favorable but, in reality, reduces their potential for revenue generation. Moreover, signing this treaty would effectively prevent governments from adopting a simpler and more effective instrument, like that proposed by the UNTC.

Low- and middle-income countries must be aware of these nuances and their implications. The differences between the two treaties may be technical, but they are not minor. If these countries are to benefit from a more just international taxation framework, they must be willing to fight for the better alternative.

Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2024.
www.project-syndicate.org

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

New-age communication

Satellite internet stands as a beacon of hope for India's quest to democratise internet access, particularly in rural and remote regions where traditional infrastructure struggles to reach. With nearly 40% of the population lacking connectivity, solutions like Starlink and JioSpaceFiber emerge as forces of change, promising high-speed broadband even in the most isolated

areas. This push not only aligns with the government's Digital India initiative but also holds the potential to revolutionise sectors like healthcare, education, logistics, and beyond, empowering communities with newfound opportunities and connectivity. Moreover, the versatility of satellite broadband extends beyond basic internet access. Its ability to transcend geographical limitations makes it a game-changer. As satellite technology continues to

evolve, its impact on India's digital landscape promises to be profound. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

More on electoral bonds

It is not surprising that donors of electoral bonds have not just donated to the party in power but the opposition too. Every business person likes to have all bets covered. It gets to the government to look the other way and the opposition not to raise a stink about it. Now that the

details of the bonds are out, a scrutiny will show that most who donated to the party in power donated to the opposition too, but in lesser amounts. It is time for the people to realise they are being duped. Instead of donations to the political parties, these companies could have slashed the prices of their products to benefit the consumers. —Anthony Henriques, Maharashtra

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

OUR TAKE

Battle against tech monopolies

The outcome of the antitrust lawsuit against Apple will have significant impact on markets

The US government filed a landmark antitrust lawsuit against Apple last week. The department of justice (DOJ) accused Apple of abusing its dominance by "building a moat around its smartphone monopoly", listing out in an 88-page complaint how the company allegedly makes it difficult for competing products to exist on its popular iPhones, the high fees it charges developers and technical barriers that downgrade the quality of communications between Apple and non-Apple devices. These practices ripple through the industries of financial services, gaming, fitness, social media, news media, entertainment and more, the complaint added, warning that unless Apple is stopped, it will "likely entrench its iPhone monopoly to other markets and parts of the economy".

It is not merely for the breadth of allegations that the lawsuit is notable. Apple is among the symbols of American dominance in technology. Silicon Valley behemoths like it, and Meta, Google, Amazon and Microsoft, have reshaped the world. Today, there is virtually no facet of life untouched by a product of any of these Big Five tech companies. Together, they are worth over \$10.5 trillion — more than three times the size of India's economy. Behind this dominance is innovation that has pushed the envelope of modern computing, bringing to the world unforeseen capabilities and efficiencies.

But that is only a part of the story. Examples of investigations and fines against these companies in recent years have shown the dominance is owed in large part to calculated decisions that strike at the heart of free market principles. For instance, Google has been fined billions of dollars for unfair dominance of its Search business, Android mobile operating system policies, and the ads platform that underpins the digital economy. Amazon has been accused of running an unfair digital marketplace and Meta (Facebook) has been investigated for buying out competitors. Microsoft was taken to the cleaners for its antitrust practices before the turn of the millennium, a case the DOJ in fact cited in its new complaint against Apple. In 1998 and early 2000s, the company was seen to have abused its dominance in personal computing and was ordered to open up its products to competitors. The outcome of the suit against Apple will be keenly watched in India, where protections are a must not just for consumers but industries too, so that the world's largest population has access to a level playing field.

Challenges of a global baby bust

The Malthusian dread of an unsustainably large human population is now giving way to concerns over a baby bust — the world reaching a scenario of too few people, in too short a time. A new study published in *The Lancet* joins other recent ones that warn of accelerated depopulation. It projects 155 of 204 countries, or nearly 76%, to have fertility rates below the replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman by 2050. By the end of the century, 97% of the countries will be below this line. There is another dimension to the problem — three-quarters of all live births will occur in low and low-middle-income nations by 2100, with more than half happening in sub-Saharan Africa.

The pushing of brakes on population growth has resulted from two key factors. State intervention is one. China's one-child policy is the obvious example, but countries like India have also nudged their populations towards greater uptake of birth control. Economic growth, advances in modern medicine and rising levels of education constitute the other. This is most evident in the US and developed Asian economies like Japan and South Korea. Indeed, fertility rates in the latter two have fallen far below replacement rates. With lower fertility rates, social security and caregiving will emerge as challenges.

Countries, especially the richer nations where populations run the risk of shrinking soon, have been trying to shore up fertility rates though with limited results. They may instead try allowing more immigration. This will, of course, not be without problems — culture clashes, inequality getting starker due to the influx of immigrants from poorer nations, and the welfare burden on States among others. The nations must weigh these against a future of sinking economies and aged populations.

A second Trump term and US foreign policy

Allies and rivals both have reason to worry. But a re-energisation of isolationism as the US's preferred stand doesn't really depend on the election's outcome

What if Donald Trump wins the United States (US) presidential elections later this year? That's the question governments around the world are now asking themselves. The former president has at least even odds of winning back the White House. But even if Trump is the same charismatic, impulsive, abrasive, transactional person he was four years ago, the world around him has become a more obviously dangerous place.

As president from 2017-2021, Trump scored some notable foreign-policy successes—a revitalised North American free trade agreement, the Abraham Accords, fairer North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) cost-sharing, new and stronger security alliances in Asia—but two wars, a slowing China, a sluggish global economy, and the startlingly fast (and accelerating) development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) will make entirely new demands on his leadership.

On China, a second Trump presidency would mean a turn towards a

more confrontational US approach to the rivalry. Begin with the return of Robert Lighthizer, Trump's hawkish trade czar, and a new push against US allies like Japan and South Korea to renegotiate trade and security terms with his administration. The success of Trump's approach will depend almost entirely on how Beijing responds.

President Xi Jinping might decide his strategy of greater (though still limited) engagement has failed, and that the US can never be a predictably reliable bargaining partner. Or he could decide that China's worsening long-term economic prospects demand a more conciliatory approach, presenting Trump with some notable policy victories. Whatever happens, a second Trump presidency would create both bigger risks in relations with China and bigger opportunities than a second Biden term would.

On NATO, Trump will weaken the transatlantic alliance. His conviction that all European members keep the promises they made decades ago to spend a minimum of 2% of their Gross Domestic Product on their own defence is deeply held—and not unreasonable. Why, he asks, if Russia poses such a grave security threat to Europe's security, did European leaders need the invasion of Ukraine to make a more serious commitment to defend their continent?

Most NATO countries won't be willing or able to meet the conditions for higher spending Trump sets. Trump is unlikely to try to withdraw

the US from the alliance, whatever threats he makes, but allies in Europe and enemies in the Kremlin will each have cause to doubt the Trump administration's commitment to defend alliance partners under attack. And European leaders won't have time or the political will to construct the "strategic autonomy" that French President Emmanuel Macron has urged to bolster Ukraine's self-defence—a major win for Russia's Vladimir Putin. The NATO States closest to Russia's borders are right to worry.

In the Middle East, Trump might play a more stabilising role. The Abraham Accords, probably the biggest foreign policy achievement of his first term, normalised relations between Israel and some of its Arab neighbours, setting conditions for a more stable and prosperous region. (It also exposed the near-total indifference that wealthy Arab governments feel toward the Palestinians.) Last fall's Hamas terrorist attacks and the crushing Israeli response to them have put this hope—and the prospect that even Saudi Arabia might cut a deal with Israel—on indefinite hold. In a second Trump term, his transactional instincts and strong relationships with Gulf Arab leaders could revive this possibility.

Trump's lack of inhibition about directly striking Iran—remember his administration's targeted assassination of Iranian defence chief Qasem Soleimani—could also create wild-card risks. But Iran has no interest in a dangerous direct confrontation with



As president from 2017-2021, Donald Trump scored some notable foreign-policy successes

either the US or Israel that it can't win, particularly when a loss might create a crisis at home. Even here, the Trump approach is more likely than the Biden administration half-measures to yield a breakthrough in the form of new concessions that's mainly positive for the Middle East and its stability.

A second Trump administration would also attempt to cut new deals, on both border security and trade policy, with the likely next Mexican President, Claudia Sheinbaum, outgoing President Lopez Obrador's preferred successor. The scheduled review of the US-Mexico-Canada trade deal in 2026 might get relations off to a contentious start, but both sides know the US has all the negotiating leverage here, and Mexico's manufacturing economy will benefit from Trump's more aggressive approach to China. Few predicted Trump could build a mutually beneficial pragmatic relationship with Lopez Obrador, who could help Sheinbaum and Trump build trust.

Finally, North Korea's Kim Jong-un

would certainly be happy to welcome Trump back, the only US president willing to bargain with him, and Trump remains intrigued by the continuing opportunity to cut the one deal he believes no other US president can get—over the North Korean nuclear programme. That's bad news, of course, for South Korea and its hawkish President Yoon Suk-yeol, who might have little say in what Trump offers Kim in exchange for a deal.

But the larger worry for US allies facing America's November elections is uncertainty about the long-term reliability of the world's most powerful government. Win or lose, Trump has changed the debate within American politics to re-energise an isolationism that hadn't gained traction in Washington since before World War II. That's a frightening new reality that doesn't depend on the election's outcome.

Ian Bremmer is the founder and board president of Eurasia Group Foundation. The views expressed are personal



Ian Bremmer

Mukoma wa Ngugi's tale: Weep not, Mother

A little more than a week ago, a series of small explosions rocked Kenyan X (or Kenyan Twitter). They were set off by Mukoma wa Ngugi, an associate professor of English at Cornell University, and the son of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan novelist and playwright, a giant of African literature. On March 13, Mukoma wrote: "My father [tagging Ngugi wa Thiong'o] physically abused my late mother — he would beat her up. Some of my earliest memories are me going to visit her at my grandmother's where she would seek refuge. But with that said it is the silencing of who she was that gets me. Ok — I have said it."

In a follow-up tweet posted on March 19, he wrote: "One of the lies...is that my mother (Nyambura) was a spy/secret agent for the Kenyatta and Moi dictatorships and led my father being detailed and exiled. This is simply not true." Those who rushed to Mukoma's X account after seeing the first tweet noticed that this is not the first time that he has spoken up for his late mother.

In a tweet dated November 28, 2022, he wrote: "It hurts to see my late mother...being systematically erased from the Ngugi wa Thiong'o story. We literally (of course) and figuratively would not be here if it was not for her keeping us glued together through the political persecutions."

Where and when did this story that Mukoma writes about, begin?

His father Ngugi wa Thiong'o was born into a poor peasant family during the British rule of Kenya in 1938; two of his brothers belonged to the Kenya Land and Freedom Army that waged a war against the British colonists in what was known as the Mau Mau Rebellion. Thiong'o published his debut novel, *Weep Not, Child*, under his English name, James Ngugi. By 1970, he began to write under his birth name, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and in his native language, Gikuyu. Thiong'o spoke truth to power. The imperialist government was replaced in 1964 by Jomo Kenyatta, the first prime minister and the first president of independent Kenya. His deputy, Daniel arap Moi, famously ordered Thiong'o's arrest in 1977, after the publication of his play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want). In the 1980s, Thiong'o taught in exile before moving to the United States, where he continues to live.

Since 1967, the celebrated novelist has been a staunch critic of African writers who published their work in English. Thiong'o advocated for telling stories in one's mother tongue, fighting against what he called "normalised abnormality", a condition rampant

A SMALL BUT GROWING NUMBER OF AFRICAN X (FORMERLY TWITTER) USERS, MAINLY WOMEN, HAVE COME FORWARD TO THANK MUKOMA FOR HIS DECISION TO SPEAK UP ABOUT THE ABUSE HIS MOTHER SUFFERED

in former colonies that have been robbed of their native culture and language. In his 1986 seminal essay, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, he wrote: "Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest... But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world... To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others."

Thiong'o outlined the role of language and argued that African writers had been forced to think, read and write in English by the colonialists, and by continuing to do so even after independence only kept them in a prolonged state of enslavement. In order to truly exert ownership of one's stories and histories, one would have to tell the tale in the language of the culture they belonged to.

A small but growing number of African X users, mainly women, have come forward to thank Mukoma for his decision to speak up about the abuse his mother suffered. For what Thiong'o's son has done is simply take a leaf out of his father's book. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong'o wrote: "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." And by telling his own story, however unpleasant, Mukoma has used it to shatter the culture of silence that allows a community to hide its ugly truths in the shadows.

In his politically-charged novels, Thiong'o drew our attention to the fact that while the identity of the oppressor may change, the language and the actions of the oppressor do not — they are coated with violence, injustice and erasure. His contribution to post-colonial studies of literature and politics is immense because he showed the mirror to both the colonisers and the colonised, and taught us how to negotiate positions of power within that complicated history.

It is ironic that Mukoma now has to fight for those very same ideas, because he pointed the finger at one of the world's biggest literary heroes, a man whose bravery has stood the test of time. But what of his cruelty? What of the violence, both physical and symbolic, that Mukoma has borne witness to? Is that not his story to tell?

In 2018, when the #MeToo movement took the world by storm, lengthy debates that took place at the time focussed on separating art from the artist. At 86, Thiong'o may earn our sympathies but not at the cost of diminishing his actions, no matter how far in the past they may be. Mukoma has his own reasons for choosing these last few years of his father's life to hold him accountable, to fight for his mother's memory, and to tell his community that the oppressor wields shame like a weapon over the oppressed, no matter the colour of their skin. By telling his story in his own words, regardless of the ostracisation and the collective condemnation, Mukoma has shown us one thing — he is his father's son.

Anushree Majumdar is a journalist and writer. The views expressed are personal

{ URSULA VON DER LEYEN } PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

I strongly condemn the terrorist attack against civilians in the Crocus City Hall in Moscow claimed by the Islamic State. My thoughts are with the victims and their families during this tragic time.

India's fight against TB must focus on women

India has the highest burden of tuberculosis (TB) in the world — over 28 lakh people in the country are affected by it every year. More than 13 lakh people around the world die of it every year. Against this backdrop, every year, we observe March 24 as World TB Day. The problem is much more common than we realise. I didn't know the full extent of India's TB burden until I became a member of an organisation of experts and policymakers that works in support of the country's TB programme. Undeniably, our country has progressed by leaps and bounds—the World Health Organization (WHO) recognised the reduction in the number of new TB cases and TB deaths in India from 2015 to 2022. However, several challenges need to be addressed in a mission mode. Of particular importance to me are the ones which arise out of gender disparities.

As some of us know, the disease most commonly affects the lungs, but it can also affect nearly every other part of the body, such as the lymph nodes, intestines, the reproductive system, and even our bones and the brain. While non-lung or extra-pulmonary TB constitutes 15-25% of all cases diagnosed each year in India, there has been a notable increase in such cases over the years. In fact, in Pune (where I live), extra-pulmonary TB constitutes 40% of the total cases reported in the last four years.

In India, just by numbers, more men contract TB of the lung, but women experience the disease differently, and are often affected by extra-pulmonary TB and, therefore, may not even show the typical symptoms of TB that doctors look for, i.e., persistent cough, low-grade fever, and significant weight loss over a short length of time, along with some others. As a result, finding and treating extra-pulmonary TB remains a challenge in India, and I'm sure this is compounded by the challenges that women generally face in accessing health care. Some of these barriers include a lack of financial independence, the societal tendency to de-prioritise women's health, and the heavy stigma that still surrounds the disease, particularly for women. In fact, this stigma is so pervasive that many women hesitate to undergo TB testing for fear of the repercussions if diagnosed. These include fears of divorce, a negative impact on their marriage prospects, and the potential for ostracisation or social isolation due to widespread misconceptions that TB is incurable.

Coupled with inadequate information among care-seekers and frontline workers about TB symptoms commonly found in women, these factors lead to missed or delayed diagnosis among this chunk of the population, which keeps them from accessing life-saving treatment in a timely and effective manner.

Acknowledging these distinct issues, the Union government formulated a gender-responsive framework in 2019 to introduce gender-sensitive services across the TB care cascade. Its recommendations, which are aimed at stakeholders such as the TB programme, frontline workers, and survivor networks, require immediate attention and implementation. It is the need of the hour to raise awareness about TB in women—symptoms of lung and extra-pulmonary TB among women, their communities, and health care workers.

It is crucial to train Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) and Auxiliary Nurse Midwives (ANMs) to recognise early signs of the different forms of the disease among women for timely referral to nearby health facilities. My engagement with Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Pune has highlighted the transformative power of these groups in fostering women's empowerment and enhancing their health literacy. Awareness drives that leverage credible and trusted community voices, such as gynaecologists, must be conducted to encourage women to seek care immediately after diagnosis and help destigmatise TB. The role of women's collectives such as Mahila Arogya Samitis and TB survivor networks is also indispensable to the country's fight against the disease, by way of providing counselling support to women and making a difference at the community level.

To successfully eliminate TB from India, we must make our health system not only responsive but also patient-centric and gender-sensitive. We need to acknowledge that TB can manifest and affect individuals differently, based on their biology, social dynamics, and economic standing. Hence, our interventions must be tailored to the unique requirements of patients. By putting women at the centre of our TB response, we can successfully eliminate TB from India.

Vandana Chavan is member, Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal



Vandana Chavan



Anushree Majumdar



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Opposition-mukt election?

Arrest of Delhi Chief Minister shows that ahead of a crucial poll, Opposition is being denied fair play



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

THE BHUTAN MODEL

Urgency of PM Modi's visit, its many outcomes, relate to China, the ghost in the room and in the neighbourhood

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi's visit to Bhutan last week underlines the special importance of the Himalayan Kingdom for India's foreign policy. The urgency of the visit, as well as its many substantive outcomes, relate to the ghost in the room during PM Modi's talks with the leadership in Bhutan — China. The economic rise of China and its growing political assertiveness over the last few decades has allowed Beijing to contest India's natural primacy in the Subcontinent. With China's economy now more than four times larger than India's, Beijing's capacity to deploy financial resources in South Asia has become much bigger. Even when China's economy was weaker than India's, Beijing focused on strategic economic cooperation with the Subcontinent. As the world's second-largest economy and neighbour to the subcontinent, China's economic salience in South Asia is now powerful and enduring.

China's wealth has generated a variety of tools to enhance its political and diplomatic clout in other nations. Beijing's influence and operations to capture critical elements of the elites and set favourable narratives have been visible all around the world. It is no surprise that India's smaller neighbours find it hard to resist these pressures. Nowhere are they more consequential than in Bhutan, nestling in the sensitive eastern Himalayas, where the frontiers of Bangladesh, India and its north-eastern provinces, Nepal and Tibet converge around the sensitive Siliguri Corridor. China-controlled Tibet's Chumbi Valley on the western flank of Bhutan is positioned like a dagger down the throat of the narrow Siliguri Corridor that connects India's mainland with its north-eastern provinces. China's growing activity in this region led to serious military tensions between Delhi and Beijing in Bhutan's disputed Doklam plateau during the summer of 2017. To be sure, Bhutan is India's most steadfast South Asian partner in the subcontinent, and it has no formal diplomatic relations with China. Yet Beijing has been mounting relentless pressure on Thimphu for a favourable border settlement and demanding a bilateral relationship equal to that with Delhi.

As External Affairs Minister Subrahmanya Jaishankar puts it, India had long neglected the nature of China's growing South Asian challenge in the name of building good relations with Beijing. Delhi is now realistic enough to recognise that it can't sustain its historic primacy over South Asia by mere fiat. It also knows it can't keep China, the world's second most powerful nation, out of the Subcontinent. Delhi's focus now is on offering deeper economic cooperation to its neighbours, treating them as sovereign equals, and developing mutually beneficial security cooperation. PM Modi's visit to Bhutan is about translating that framework into concrete reality. The joint statement issued after the PM's visit said, "Bharat for Bhutan and Bhutan for Bharat is an abiding reality of the region". Delhi and Thimphu backed up this claim with strong commitments to greater consultation and coordination on security issues and building transformative economic connectivity, both physical and digital. Although each of India's relations with its neighbours has a unique complexity, getting Bhutan right could provide a productive template for the rejuvenation of India's rocky relations with other neighbours.

THE UNLEVEL FIELD

A new study warns of rising inequality in India. The issue requires a deeper inquiry, a broader debate

A NEW WORKING paper by World Inequality Lab, a Paris-based research organisation, has come out with estimates that suggest that economic inequality in India has "skyrocketed since the early 2000s". The paper titled "Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj" states that "the 'Billionaire Raj' headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces". It ends with a warning: "It is unclear how long such inequality levels can sustain without major social and political upheaval."

Indeed, the data quoted in the paper is sobering. The four authors, including Thomas Piketty, claim to have combined national income accounts, wealth aggregates, tax tabulations, billionaire rankings, rich lists, and surveys on income, consumption and wealth to create data series going back to 1922 for income inequality and 1961 for wealth inequality. On the income inequality front, their calculations suggest that in 2022-23, 22.6 per cent of India's national income went to just the top 1 per cent; this is the highest level recorded in the data series since 1922 — higher than even during the inter-war colonial period. In a global perspective, India's top 1 per cent income share appears to be among the very highest in the world based on the World Inequality Database, behind only perhaps Peru, Yemen and a couple of other small countries. On the wealth inequality front, the top 1 per cent wealth share stood at 40.1 per cent in 2022-23 — also at its highest level since the start of the data series. The paper also notes that in India wealth is highly concentrated even within the top 1 per cent. The last but not the least remarkable aspect of the findings is that these estimates of inequality are likely to represent "a lower bound" of the actual inequality levels. That's because, the authors say, "the quality of economic data in India is notably poor and has seen a decline recently".

If these assessments are correct, the authors' policy prescriptions — such as a super tax on Indian billionaires and multimillionaires, restructuring the tax schedule to include both income and wealth etc — might sound reasonable. But that is a big if. That's because some other economists look at data and reach exactly the opposite conclusions. For instance, in a recent article, economists Surjit Bhalla and Karan Bhasin look at the latest consumption expenditure survey results to say that India has registered an "unprecedented decline in both urban and rural inequality" between 2011-12 and 2022-23. Clearly, the issue of economic inequality requires a deeper inquiry and a broader debate.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



THE DEBATE ABOUT the nature of India's current regime has been raging for some time now. On the one hand, there is an argument that the personalisation of authority and the corrosion of institutions, combined with an exclusivist social and cultural agenda, have made India a nominal electoral democracy. On the other hand, supporters of the regime tend to rely on the popularity of the prime minister and the electoral victories emerging out of bitter campaigns and high turnouts as proof of its democratic credentials — not just meeting the minimal standards of democracy but making India's democracy a vibrant affair.

In this backdrop, the arrest of a popular chief minister presents credible direction on where the regime is headed. Without going into the merits of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) claim, the timing and the audacity of arresting Kejriwal signify two things: That the BJP government doesn't worry about the possible fallout of this arrest and that it doesn't care about so-called democratic credentials.

After a decade in politics and despite the Kejriwal phenomenon getting somewhat stale, Kejriwal remains popular in the National Capital Territory and retains at least a limited image recognition. To arrest a sitting chief minister with these credentials requires serious inquiry into what it means. Kejriwal is not the only chief minister (though he is the first sitting CM) or Opposition leader to be arrested — Hemant Soren of Jharkhand is in jail — and it is not confined to CMs alone. More recently, K Kavitha of BRS has also been arrested. In other words, the BJP has sent out a message that it is not afraid of consequences.

The BJP will adopt two strategies in the coming weeks: First, it will raise the pitch about some other issue so that the obliging media will shift its focus and the arrests will lose political significance. In fact, the inability to obtain bail may automatically sidetrack the issue. In the case of Soren, the judiciary has conveniently set aside its oft-repeated dictum of "bail-not-jail" and this has enormously helped in the matter getting sidetracked. The BJP is likely to also make appropriate noises about its anti-corruption crusade in order to convince the public that actions such as these are part of its drive to cleanse politics. But above all, the BJP govern-

ment keeps arresting Opposition leaders because of its rather bloated confidence that nothing it does is likely to have any adverse consequences for it.

Only time will tell us if this is misplaced or if the BJP has indeed been able to vitiate public discourse to the extent that the people draw a vicarious satisfaction from brazen actions against opponents of the government. For now, it seems that the BJP will portray everything it does as part of its efforts at national reconstruction and, therefore, questions of procedure are irrelevant. Democracy no longer means norms but results — contributing to an imaginary national selfhood.

The arrest of Kejriwal needs to be seen as part of a larger process of consigning democracy to the dustbin of sham formality. Without going to the extent of driving out Opposition parties from the electoral fray, the Opposition is being denied fair play. We are witnessing many apparently unconnected developments that together present a dangerous pattern: With two chief ministers being arrested, all Opposition chief ministers and ex-chief ministers are on notice. They can be put behind bars the moment they become a threat that the ruling party cannot neutralise through ordinary political manipulations. The hanging sword of ED will apply to any other political leader who may be perceived as recalcitrant by the ruling party. This has nothing to do with electoral prospects — there is an element of vendetta and deep-rooted disdain for anyone to whom the regime takes a dislike.

With arrests, raids and freezing of bank accounts, it is futile to ask how there can be a so-called level playing field. Then there are less punitive but equally hate-filled constitutional immoralities being indulged in by governors in various states. These intrigues make it impossible for governments run by Opposition parties to function effectively and take on the ruling party at the Centre. Only the silent and the obedient like the BJD have a chance to survive.

To go back to the debate we mentioned at the beginning: How does one describe the current regime? How does one make sense of the contemporary moment?

Some time ago, scholars complained that India is becoming an "electoral-only" democracy. Subsequently, the regime was named an

electoral autocracy. However, the resource asymmetry and misuse of official machinery on the eve of elections has cast a dark shadow on these rather circumspect descriptions. It begs the question whether taming the Opposition qualifies the current regime as democratic. Countries that go to elections with a consistent record of suppressing opposition and dissent hardly qualify as democracies.

But the conscience of our constitutional institutions such as the Election Commission of India or the courts is not stirred by this mockery of democracy. The conscience of our media and opinion makers is hardly troubled by sustained erosion of rule of law and fair play. As India goes to polls, a popular — albeit controversial — chief minister is arrested and now the discussion will be about his persona and politics, about legal formalities and about — ironically for Kejriwal — "clean politics".

Above all, this development brings forth a deeper transformation in the way the public is made to understand the meaning of democracy. A regime that has systematically dismantled the edifice of democracy is busy shaping a new public sensibility about what democracy means. In this new understanding, a visionary leader can get away with anything and all opposition is characterised as seditious. Getting elected is proof of democracy, irrespective of the gory details that constitute the underbelly of an election victory.

With all his faults and limitations, Kejriwal (like Soren, KCR, Kavitha and others) carved out a politics of his own opposed to the regime and is paying for that. Even in normal times, the arrest of a chief minister should become a matter of debate about democracy — about the relationship between the government and the Opposition, between the Centre and the states and about the autonomy of investigating agencies. When that happens on the eve of elections, it is a clear signal that the regime is outgrowing the Constitution and principles of democracy.

With its manifest intolerance and a determined policy of Opposition-mukt elections, the questions about the nature and nomenclature of India's current regime hardly need any discussion.

The writer, based in Pune, taught political science

WTO's EXISTENTIAL CRISIS

Trade multilateralism is beset with problems, creating greater global uncertainty



PRABHASH RANJAN

AMIDST MEDIA HYPE, the 13th biennial ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ended without significant accomplishment. The WTO member countries could not agree on how to solve several issues staring at the international community. First is whether countries have the right to purchase, stockpile, and distribute food to their citizens in need. Also known as the public stockholding (PSH) programme, while this is the sovereign right of countries, the WTO rules throw a spanner in the works.

One of the central objectives of the WTO is to cut trade-distorting domestic subsidies. There are limits to the subsidies a country can provide, such as minimum support price (MSP). The WTO rules provide that this price support will be assessed using an average price of the base years 1986-88, which is more than three-and-a-half-decades old. It thus becomes challenging for countries like India to pursue PSH programmes using the instrumentality of MSP. This issue is significant as the farmers of Punjab have hit the streets again demanding a legal guarantee to MSP. While countries agreed upon a peace clause in 2013, which provides some legal immunity to India's MSP policy, it is insufficient. Conscious of this, India has been negotiating hard for a permanent solution. But the recent ministerial meet came a cropper on this. It seems the US and other agricultural exporting nations, also known as the Cairns group, have, again, suc-

ceeded in blocking any meaningful movement on this issue. India must continue striving for the PSH solution. But it will also have to think of new ways to support farmers, such as augmenting existing income support schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi that are WTO-compatible.

The next important issue on which the ministerial failed is regulating subsidies given by the industrialised world to their industrial shipping fleets indulging in overcapacity and over-fishing (OCOF). OCOF has led to a substantial depletion of fishing stock posing a grave threat to the marine environment. India has been demanding binding rules to rein in these subsidies, with a transition period for developing countries to implement these rules. But, once again, the richer countries prevailed by ensuring that no rules were adopted.

Another major letdown has been the failure to make any significant headway toward solving the crisis affecting the dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). Hailed as a feather in the WTO's cap, the DSM has been paralysed since 2019 due to the US blocking the appointment of the members to the Appellate Body (AB) — the second tier of the two-tier DSM. While WTO member countries have reiterated their commitment to having a well-functioning DSM by the end of 2024, the writing on the wall is clear. The US will not allow the restoration of the AB as it existed till 2019. The most significant proof of this is how the de-

veloped countries led informal and non-transparent negotiations on dispute settlement last year. Perplexingly, the talks focussed, not on the dysfunctionality of the AB, but on other issues that perhaps don't need critical attention.

India, one of those demanding the restoration of the body, must understand the US game plan — the de-judicialisation of trade multilateralism. The WTO was created when the neoliberal consensus emerged after the Cold War and the collapse of communism. This period saw not just the legalisation of international relations (countries subjecting themselves to international law) but also its judicialisation (the expansion of international courts and tribunals that dominate decision-making in place of national actors). De-judicialisation, as Daniel Abebe and Tom Ginsburg define it, is the reverse phenomenon where countries weaken international courts to take back decision-making power. This is what the US seems to be doing with the WTO's dispute settlement. It has wrested control from the AB to unilaterally respond to the geo-economic challenges that a rising China presents.

This ministerial deepened WTO's existential crisis. It shows that trade multilateralism is beset with problems, pushing the world to higher levels of uncertainty and volatility.

The writer teaches at the Faculty of Legal Studies, South Asian University. Views are personal

MARCH 26, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

GOVERNOR RESHUFFLE

IN A MAJOR administrative reshuffle, the government has changed governors of four states and the Lt-Governor of Delhi. Delhi Lt-Governor Jagmohan has been appointed the new Jammu and Kashmir governor. P G Gavai, former adviser to the Punjab governor, will be the new Lt-Governor of Delhi.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the Federal Chancellor of Austria, Fred Sinowatz, expressed concern over the nuclear arms race and the need for resumption of disarmament negotiations during their 90-minute talks and during speeches at the dinner PM Gandhi hosted in his honour.

MITRA ON RBI POLICY

WEST BENGAL FINANCE Minister Ashok Mitra has taken a serious view of the RBI's refusal to accept the state government's cheques on March 23 at what he described as "the direct connivance of Union Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee." Mitra made a

statement in the House on the RBI's policy and later held a news conference in his room at the state assembly.

DOCTORS' STRIKE

WHILE THE RESIDENT doctors of Safdarjung Hospital continued their strike for the third day, demanding "disciplinary action against erring karamcharis," the Karamchari Union began a counter-agitation — a relay hunger-strike — demanding "stringent action against resident doctors who made false allegations against karamcharis." The karamcharis have also urged the hospital authorities to declare the resident doctors' strike as illegal.

ARMS RACE CONCERNS

INDIA AND AUSTRIA voiced serious concern over the nuclear arms race and called for individual and collective effort to get the super powers to resume talks on disarmament.





C R Sasikumaran

How AAP lost its way

Lacking a vision for the nation and a second line of leaders, after Arvind Kejriwal's arrest, the party faces a crisis that is also of its own making



ASHUTOSH

WHAT AN IRONY! The man who was supposed to cleanse the system of corruption is now in the Enforcement Directorate's (ED) custody, facing charges of corruption. Arvind Kejriwal, the Chief Minister of Delhi and Aam Aadmi Party supremo, has been arrested by the ED in connection with the liquor scam.

Kejriwal's arrest, after the election process has begun and the AAP and Congress have decided to contest together in Delhi, shows that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has taken a calculated risk. The ED's move has the potential to boomerang and damage the BJP's electoral prospects, at least in Delhi. But it appears that the arrest is part of Modi's game plan to present himself as a messiah who is out to fight corruption and can take tough decisions. Ever since he became the PM, Modi has consciously built his image as someone who neither indulges in corruption himself nor allows anyone else to do so. He has left no stone unturned to paint the Opposition, including the AAP, as a collection of political parties neck-deep in corruption. The arrest of two chief ministers so close to the elections — Hemant Soren in Jharkhand and Kejriwal in Delhi — is proof that Modi wants corruption to be a big poll issue. Whether or not this strategy is successful, Kejriwal's arrest certainly has the potential to create an existential crisis for the AAP.

The AAP is a product of the movement against corruption. Before launching a political party, its leaders had no experience in active politics. Unlike other political parties,

the AAP does not have institutional memory to fall back on, and neither does it have the institutional robustness to face a crisis of this magnitude. While such crises often throw up other leaders, for the present, this looks unlikely for the AAP. Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, who could have filled the vacuum in Kejriwal's absence, are already incapacitated. In the absence of all three, there is nobody who is acceptable to all the party leaders, MLAs, MPs, office bearers and cadres. Not allowing a second line of leaders to rise has been one of the biggest failures of the AAP. It's well-known that the party is so centralised around Kejriwal that nobody is allowed to be autonomous and take decisions independently.

From its inception, the AAP has been combative — a reflection of Kejriwal's personality. He is the one leader in Indian politics who revels in crises and is polarising like Modi. He can be liked or hated, but never ignored. His genius lies in his single-minded pursuit of a goal and he has the rare ability to rise from the ashes like a phoenix. He was the architect of the Anna Hazare movement which shook the entire political establishment, leading to the Congress party's decline. If Congress today is in the ICU, it's because of Kejriwal. Modi and the BJP skillfully exploited the situation created by Kejriwal and formed the government at the centre.

Several obituaries were written for his political career when Kejriwal resigned as CM after 49 days in the saddle in 2014. Then, the AAP lost all seven seats in the 2014 parliamentary election. This was when even its leaders lost hope of the party winning the assembly elections in 2015. But it bounced back with an unprecedented mandate, winning 67 out of 70 seats. This was possible because Kejriwal could galvanise the party and connect with the people. But today, when it is in deep trouble, he will not be free to lead it. The provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), under which he is charged, are such that bail will not be easy

The biggest challenge before the party is saving its government in Delhi, although the AAP says that Kejriwal will run the government from jail. This argument makes for good rhetoric but is devoid of legal legs to stand on. It exposes the inherent weakness of the party, showing that either Kejriwal trusts no one among his colleagues or that he is not well-versed with the constitutional framework. To take this position would be to play into the hands of the BJP and the Modi government, as it will lead to a constitutional breakdown, becoming a fit case for the central government to invoke Article 356 for the imposition of President's Rule in Delhi.

and he might have to spend months in jail.

The first — and biggest — challenge before the party is saving its government in Delhi, although the AAP says that Kejriwal will run the government from jail. This argument makes for good rhetoric but is devoid of legal legs to stand on. It exposes the inherent weakness of the party, showing that either Kejriwal trusts no one among his colleagues or that he is not well-versed with the constitutional framework. A chief minister is the fulcrum of the government and if he is in jail then, for all practical purposes, he is unable to run the administration. To take this position would be to play into the hands of the BJP and the Modi government, as it will lead to a constitutional breakdown, becoming a fit case for the central government to invoke Article 356 for the imposition of President's Rule in Delhi. Ideally, Kejriwal should have resigned and let the party elect a new leader who could be the CM in his absence, like Lalu Prasad and Jayalalitha did when they were arrested. Even Hemant Soren, before getting arrested, paved the way for Champai Soren to replace him.

The AAP's current strategy will backfire and might even lead to a situation where Delhi's deemed statehood status is withdrawn and it goes back to its pre-1993 status, with no elected government or assembly. That would be a disaster for the AAP.

The AAP's emergence was a ray of hope, hailed as the return of idealism in Indian politics. It had the potential to emerge as a national alternative to the BJP and Congress. The AAP embodied the rejection of the old establishment. It could have destroyed the old edifice and constructed a new political structure. Alas, its lack of a sense of history and absence of a vision for rebuilding the nation has led to the AAP becoming the disappointment that it is today.

The writer, a former member of AAP, is co-founder and editor of SatyaHindi and author of Hindu Rashtree



HITESH JAIN

Don't browbeat the court

Demonisation of judiciary, central agencies by AAP, allies undermines rule of law

IN A DEMOCRACY, the judiciary serves as the guardian of the rule of law, ensuring that every citizen, irrespective of their position, is treated equally. This principle, foundational to our democratic fabric, faces unprecedented scrutiny in the wake of recent political controversies, most notably the "liquorgate" scandal involving Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, and further exacerbated by the audacious attempts of political figures like Kapil Sibal to influence judicial proceedings.

A recent article by Pratap Bhanu Mehta ('A chilling moment', IE, March 23) has stirred the pot by criticising the judiciary's stance and calling for exceptional treatment of political figures involved in legal battles. This perspective not only undermines the sanctity of the judicial process but also threatens the very principles of democracy by promoting a dangerous precedent of preferential treatment.

The case against Manish Sisodia, which subsequently implicated Arvind Kejriwal, has been the focal point of an intense debate.

As it refused to grant bail to Sisodia, the Supreme Court spoke of a meticulously orchestrated scheme. Contrary to the narrative propagated by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and its sympathisers, the evidence as detailed by the court delineates a narrative of calculated deceit and corruption.

Kapil Sibal's reported attempt to browbeat the Supreme Court judges by insinuating that their legacy would be at stake if they failed to entertain certain petitions under Article 32 of the Constitution is part of a familiar strategy employed by certain political figures. This approach seeks to manipulate judicial outcomes by evoking concern for the court's historical reputation, undermining judicial impartiality.

Moreover, the narrative pushed by some, including Mehta, that calls for the judiciary to extend beyond its legal mandate to support Kejriwal, is misguided and perilous. It suggests a tyranny of power where laws are bent to serve political ends, thereby eroding trust in the judicial system. Such a stance not only sets a bad precedent but

also undermines the judiciary's independence, suggesting that political status should warrant preferential treatment.

This saga also raises significant questions about the Opposition's stance, particularly the hypocrisy of the INDI Alliance. The swift transition from accusing Kejriwal of being the "commander-in-chief" of the conspiracy to crying foul over a purported vendetta highlights a troubling pattern of political opportunism that disregards the rule of law for political gain.

The call for the judiciary to sidestep its responsibilities is not only an affront to the principle of equality before the law but also a misunderstanding of the judiciary's role in a democracy. The legal system's integrity hinges on its impartiality and its commitment to justice, irrespective of the individuals involved. To suggest that the judiciary should act as an arbiter of political battles, rather than an upholder of the law, is to misunderstand its purpose and threaten the democratic process.

Furthermore, the strategic demonisation

of investigative agencies and the judiciary by the AAP and its allies serves as a tactic to undermine the legal process. This, coupled with the relentless vilification of opposing political figures, reveals a disconcerting pattern of governance that leans towards anarchy over order, chaos over governance.

Rule of law must stand paramount, untainted by political affiliations and unwavering by public figures' status. The judiciary's role as the arbiter of justice must be preserved, free from external pressures that seek to distort the legal process for political ends. As these cases unfold, they serve as stark reminders of the importance of judicial independence and the dangers of undermining it for political gain. Democracy thrives on the principles of fairness, justice, and equality before the law, and any attempt to compromise these tenets threatens not just the judiciary's integrity but the democratic fabric of our nation.

The writer is Vice President, Mumbai BJP and managing partner, Parinam Law Associates

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It is necessary to reform the mechanisms of the WTO to make them more rational. It is equally important for countries to bridge their differences, build consensus, and work together as a foundation and driving force."

— GLOBAL TIMES, CHINA

Taste of discrimination

That Zomato could confidently roll out a policy of segregation demonstrates how caste remains embedded in quotidian practices



SHIVANI KAPOOR

ON MARCH 20, 1927, B.R. Ambedkar led the famous Mahad Satyagraha to forcibly implement the 1923 resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council which stated that the Depressed Classes should be allowed to freely use public places. The resolution could not be implemented in Mahad due to opposition from upper-caste Hindus. In a radical act of defiance, Ambedkar, along with thousands of members of the Depressed Classes, drank water from the Chawdar tank. This resulted in a violent response from the upper castes who argued that the tank had been defiled by the untouchables. Almost a century later, on March 19, Zomato, a popular food delivery app, announced the introduction of a "pure vegetarian mode and a pure vegetarian fleet" for its vegetarian customers who want to order food from "pure vegetarian restaurants" and do not like their food to be contaminated with "spills" and "smells" of meat-based food. Zomato certainly did not imagine that its announcement would land so close to the anniversary of the Mahad Satyagraha, but history can be unforgiving. Hindu society has always attempted to brush caste out of sight and away from discerning noses. But caste continues to remain embedded in the quotidian practices, as the Zomato incident demonstrates.

Ambedkar was a forceful proponent of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage as ways to annihilate caste. Eating together is a powerful act, especially when conducted across social identities. University messes, public programmes like school lunches, eating together in workplaces, use of public utilities like water taps and dispensers and occasional visits of politicians to Dalit households are the test cases for understanding social hierarchies and equality. Tragically, often in these instances, equality and dignity are compromised. The Zomato decision stands in line with this larger trend, veering towards segregation rather than the spirit of inter-dining. Where does this segregation find sanction from?

Caste fundamentally enforces norms of purity and pollution through distancing — a calibration of sensory engagement with the "other". The touch, smells, sounds, taste and sights of the "other's" body, food, language, clothes can potentially pollute those higher in the caste hierarchy. With Brahmanical sanction behind vegetarian food, meat becomes the stinky, distasteful other. It is telling that Zomato's vegetarian customers seem to be concerned not just about the spills from meat-based food which might touch their food during delivery, they are also concerned about the trans-

ference of the smells of meat. Smelling is not just a physical phenomenon involving the transfer of odorants from source to nose. Much like John Berger's famous "ways of seeing", and the different kinds of touch we educate children about, odours also carry meanings and significations. The smell of meat denotes impurity and pollution in a caste-ordered society. Odours are also notoriously hard to control, unlike sights, sounds and touch. They will linger in the delivery boxes, long after the meat-based food has been delivered. A physical barrier between the vegetarian and meat-based food will also not stop pollution through odours. The anxiety about smells, voiced by Zomato's customers, thus exposes deep concerns about caste purity, much more than spillage. "Pure" vegetarianism, therefore, connotes an excess over vegetarianism — food which is not meat but more importantly, which has not been contaminated by the touch and smells of the "other". Zomato's dogged insistence on "pure" in multiple announcements reinforces the conclusion that caste is the trigger for the demand for a vegetarian mode and fleet.

However, the question of segregation does not end at separating food alone. The workforce delivering this food will also be segregated. Ambedkar had perceptively argued that caste is a system of graded hierarchy between labour and labourers. The Zomato case is a perfect illustration of this definition of caste. Due to widespread social media criticism, the company has rolled back the visual segregation of delivery persons into red and green uniforms — a decision which would have been truly disastrous in a society where food choices are routinely subjected to violent and discriminatory consequences — yet the actual segregation of workers persists. One is forced to ask, who will be eligible to deliver a "pure vegetarian" order? Whose touch and smell will be "pure" enough to not contaminate this food? Assignment of workers based on their caste and religious identity — whether done through human or AI intervention — will not just be unethical but also unconstitutional. However, this demand is also not unheard of, not just in traditional labour contexts, but also in the neo-liberal gig economy. What is even more worrying is that no one within the company found this policy to be problematic, hinting at the lack of diversity in hiring and decision-making processes.

The Mahad Satyagraha is remembered as an iconic moment in the demand for a casteless society where basic human needs and dignity are met irrespective of the silos of identity. Years after Mahad and following social and political movements to mitigate and compensate for the ills of caste, the pitfalls of such a policy should have been obvious. Yet, the fact that Zomato could confidently roll out a discriminatory policy is reason for pause and contemplation.

The writer is associate professor, O.P.Jindal Global University. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A DESPERATE MOVE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Kejriwal in custody' (IE, March 23). The blatant misuse of central agencies against Opposition leaders is unprecedented in India. Arvind Kejriwal's arrest was just a question of "when", not "if". However, with battle lines drawn, on the heels of the impending general elections, the move might boomerang to cost the BJP electorally. The AAP's repeated success in assembly and local elections and its growing footprint in other states like Punjab has been a cause of concern for the ruling BJP. The Delhi chief minister's arrest, following that of Sisodia and Sanjay Singh, is a desperate attempt by the BJP to cripple a party that it has not been able to beat at the hustings.

Vijai Pant, Hempur

MUSIC FOR ALL

THIS REFERS TO the article, "Notes of dissonance" (IE, March 23). The artists who have attacked fellow musician T M Krishna's recognition as Sangita Kalanidhi have accused him of attempting "to polarise and destabilise Indian classical music" along caste and communal lines. This is strange because Carnatic classical music is already exclusive of "lower castes," and TMK is trying to include them, not just into Carnatic classical music but into the world of music as a whole. TMK's courage should be appreciated rather than condemned.

SS Paul, Nadia

FUNDING POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Who pays, who wins' (IE, March 23). The Supreme Court's verdict holding electoral bonds (EB) unconstitutional led to a positive development. It shut down funding that hid information relevant to voters. But EBs represent a fraction of the funding for parties. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, aggregate expenditure across parties was around Rs 55,000 to 60,000 crore. A takeaway from the data on EBs is that there's a correlation between the extent of regulation in an area of economic activity and political contributions. An antidote to this abuse is greater transparency in political funding. But the political class has no incentive to find a solution. Even at the end of the EB saga, the larger question of transparency in political funding remains unanswered.

Khokhan Das, Kolkata

UKRAINE BOGEYMAN

THIS REFERS TO the report, "Moscow massacre: ISIS-K claims it did it, Russia pursues 'Ukraine link'" (IE, March 24). It is a cruel irony that Russia, the perpetrator of many terror attacks from Syria to Ukraine, was struck by terrorists. US intelligence had warned the Kremlin that ISIS-K was planning an attack. Yet Vladimir Putin focused on imaginary threats from Ukraine. He wants to attain glory for himself, no matter the cost to the long-suffering Russian people. Now, rather than going after his actual enemies, he may well try to find some way to pin the Moscow attack on Ukraine and the United States and use it to justify further assaults on innocent Ukrainians.

Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended
from THE FRIEND OF INDIA - Founded 1818

Trump's woes

The captivating narrative of former President Donald Trump's venture into the world of meme stocks cannot be ignored. With his SPAC, Digital World Acquisition Corp (DWAC), poised to merge with Truth Social, Mr Trump's foray into the stock market has ignited a fervent following among his loyal supporters. Yet, behind the veil of enthusiasm lies a story of financial uncertainty and legal entanglements. At its core, the allure of meme stocks lies in their ability to captivate the imagination of a passionate community. In this case, supporters of Mr Trump have rallied behind his vision for Truth Social, eagerly anticipating its public debut. However, enthusiasm alone cannot overshadow the harsh reality of the company's financial predicament. Despite boasting millions of sign-ups, Trump Media & Technology Group finds itself grappling with staggering losses and a precarious cash position. The impending merger with DWAC may provide a much-needed lifeline, but questions linger regarding the company's long-term sustainability. Mr Trump's personal financial woes only add to the intrigue surrounding this saga. With a recent half-billion-dollar fine and mounting legal challenges, his liquidity crunch has become increasingly apparent. The struggle to secure a bond amidst a flurry of rejections underscores the gravity of his situation. As the deadline looms, the prospect of asset liquidation or reliance on wealthy benefactors looms large, casting a shadow over Mr Trump's ambitions in the stock market.

Moreover, the history of SPAC mergers offers a sobering reality check. While DWAC's current share price may suggest lofty valuations, past performance paints a more cautionary tale. The post-merger fate of SPACs often sees a stark decline in share prices, leaving retail investors in the lurch. Despite desperate assurances from supporters, the inherent risks associated with such ventures cannot be overlooked. In the face of mounting scepticism, proponents of Truth Social remain steadfast in their belief. They view criticism as misguided and maintain unwavering optimism in the company's potential. However, blind faith can only sustain for so long in the unforgiving realm of finance. As the dust settles and economic realities come to light, the true test of Truth Social's viability will unfold. This is a captivating tale of ambition, uncertainty, and resilience. While Mr Trump's supporters rally behind him with unwavering fervour, the road ahead is fraught with challenges. Only time will tell whether Truth Social emerges as a triumph or a cautionary tale in the annals of finance. The convergence of Mr Trump's personal financial challenges and the historical trends of SPAC mergers paint a sobering picture of the risks involved in his latest venture. As the deadline for his legal bond looms and the uncertain fate of DWAC shares hangs in the balance, investors must tread cautiously. Prudence dictates a thorough assessment of the potential pitfalls ahead. Only time will reveal the true outcome of Mr Trump's foray into meme stocks, leaving both supporters and sceptics on edge.

Disruptions and hope

In the vast tapestry of global commerce, few threads are as crucial to India's economic fabric as the flow of goods through the Red Sea. Yet, recent disruptions due to geopolitical tensions have thrown a stark spotlight on the vulnerabilities inherent in such concentrated trade routes. The ramifications, both immediate and long-term, are profound, impacting not only India's inflation and growth prospects but also underscoring the urgent need for diversification and resilience in trade strategies. As the government rightly points out, approximately 80 per cent of India's trade with Europe traverses the Red Sea, encompassing vital commodities ranging from crude oil to textiles. The recent spate of missile and drone attacks by Yemen's Houthi militants has prompted shipping firms to reroute vessels, circumventing the Suez Canal and elongating transit times. Consequently, the resultant surge in freight costs and insurance premiums threatens to inflate the prices of imported goods, amplifying inflationary pressures domestically.

Moreover, the ripple effects extend beyond the realm of imports, casting a shadow over India's export competitiveness. Disruptions in shipping lanes jeopardise the timely delivery of agricultural produce, textiles, and petroleum products, eroding the price advantage crucial for sustaining market share in global trade. The government's acknowledgment of these challenges underscores the imperative for proactive measures to diversify trade routes and fortify transportation options.

Yet, amidst these challenges looms a glimmer of optimism. Despite the headwinds buffeting India's economic sails, there remains a steadfast confidence in the nation's resilience and capacity to weather the storm. The upward revision of the GDP growth estimate for the current fiscal year to 7.6 per cent signals not just statistical optimism but is a testament to the enduring strength of India's economic fundamentals. It underscores the agility and adaptability ingrained within the Indian economy, capable of navigating treacherous waters and emerging stronger on the other side. Furthermore, the inflation outlook, while tinged with apprehension, is tempered by the promise of seasonal relief. The uptick in summer crop sowing offers a glimmer of hope for stabilising food prices, providing a cushion against inflationary pressures. However, it is imperative not to underestimate the challenges ahead, as the central bank maintains a steadfast focus on steering inflation towards the 4 per cent target. In essence, the Red Sea crisis serves as a stark reminder of the intricate interplay between geopolitics and global commerce, underscoring the fragility of supply chains tethered to volatile regions. Yet, it also catalyses a moment of reckoning, compelling policymakers and industry stakeholders alike to recalibrate strategies and embrace diversification as a cornerstone of resilience. The journey ahead may be fraught with uncertainties, but it is also ripe with opportunities to forge a more robust and adaptive economic landscape - one that thrives amidst adversity and charts a course towards sustainable growth and prosperity.

Elections and the Public

The importance of caste in elections becomes apparent when one reads local newspapers carrying leading articles that give the caste composition of electoral constituencies, along with detailed analyses of the percentage of a particular caste that would vote for a certain candidate. Such mumbo-jumbo could have been dismissed as a journalistic innovation, because caste-based enumeration was last done in 1931, and moreover, it is almost impossible to decipher the composition of the votes polled by a candidate. However, political parties rely on caste considerations, right from the selection of candidates



Former Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) had described elections as 'the dance of democracy,' but unfortunately, according to the present CEC, 'four Ms' money, muscle power, misinformation and Model Code of Conduct violations, threaten to spoil the tone of the coming elections. Alarming statistics of seizure of cash and liquor during earlier elections show that this is not an idle apprehension; according to estimates, about Rs.12,000 crore to Rs.15,000 crore cash was given to voters directly during the 2019 General Elections, which pales into comparison with the black money unearthed in subsequent Assembly elections.

Also, despite the presence of Expenditure Observers, almost all candidates spent far beyond the limits laid down by the Election Commission. Taxpayers, too, pay a heavy price for the privilege of voting; the Election Commission spent more than Rs.10,000 crore for conducting the last General Election.

Bringing governance to a halt, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) operates for long periods, which is more than two and a half months for the present elections. Yet, the MCC does not deter wrongdoers, because most election-related FIRs are withdrawn as soon as elections conclude.

The role of media during elections is not above reproach. A large section of the media views elections as manna from heaven, which increases ad revenue, readership and TRPs, not counting illicit earnings through paid and fake news.

Election Surveys aired on many prominent TV channels are a case in point. After elections, many such Surveys are found to be far off the mark, with a suspicion of having been commissioned to spread misinformation by particular political parties.

Additionally, even in the third decade of the twenty-first century, the spectre of caste continues to haunt Indian polity. One would have thought that with increasing literacy and awareness, the influence of caste would wane, what with educated voters resenting compartmentalisation on the basis of caste. But the genie of caste mysteriously comes out of the bottle the moment an election is announced.

The importance of caste in elections becomes apparent when one reads local newspapers carrying leading articles that give the caste composition of electoral constituencies, along with detailed analyses of

the percentage of a particular caste that would vote for a certain candidate. Such mumbo-jumbo could have been dismissed as a journalistic innovation, because caste-based enumeration was last done in 1931, and moreover, it is almost impossible to decipher the composition of the votes polled by a candidate.

However, political parties rely on caste considerations, right from the selection of candidates. Later on, most party manifestos promise reservation on caste basis. Finally, ministries are often allotted on caste basis.

All kinds of fraudsters thrive during election time; some float bogus political parties, to launder black money through political donations. Some others supply muscle power to capture booths, others supply audiences for speeches and participants for processions. Suppliers of paper, tents, crockery, broken down jeeps etc., hike charges sky high for their wares, but issue bills for smaller amounts to fool tax inspectors and election observers. After results are declared, middlemen come into operation, enticing legislators with offers they cannot refuse.

In this 'win at any cost' scenario, none of the major parties seriously bat for good governance. Rather, if earlier manifestos are any indication, parties will promise targeted sops, and freebies, ranging from free laptops, free electricity to construction of temples and free teeth yatras.

Competitive populism, hyper-nationalism, hyper-religiosity and a vote-gathering appeal to regional pride has been the mainstay of recent election campaigns, with political parties shamelessly trying to create a 'we' versus 'they' binary - blind to the dangers of unleashing fissiparous tendencies.

Canvassing is often marred by personal attacks and threats by leaders of political parties, who shamelessly call each other 'extortionists', 'mafia' and 'Pak agents'; such acrimony guarantees that democracy and the public would lose, regardless of whoever wins at the hustings.

This low level of electoral discourse is fuelled by provocative posts in social media, which are almost impossible to monitor. Even otherwise, the Election Commission has a poor record of dealing with purveyors of hate

speech. The pitch of political parties for the present elections has been queered by two judgments of the Supreme Court; firstly, by the Sita Soren case, in which the Court held that legislators could be prosecuted should they vote for money.

Thus, Aya Rams and Gaya Rams, who survive nay, thrive on the mercy of benevolent Speakers, may sometimes, find the police on their trail. Then, the judgement in the Electoral Bonds case threatens to expose political and corporate corruption of humongous dimensions.

To recapitulate, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) filed a petition in the Supreme Court in 2017, soon after the Electoral Bonds (EB) scheme was announced in Parliament. The petitioners asked the Supreme Court to declare the EB scheme unconstitutional, and to nullify the corresponding amendments to various laws.

The Supreme Court allowed the petition on 11 February 2024, and probably, to make up for lost time, directed the State Bank of India (SBI) to supply details of donations received through EBs to the Election Commission (EC) by 12 March 2024, and directed EC to publish such details by 15 March 2024. Barely a week before the Supreme Court deadline, SBI filed a petition asking for time till 30 June 2024. In a rare display of firmness, the Supreme Court gave SBI a dressing down, and exactly 30 hours to comply with its orders. Thereafter, things moved like lightning; the EC published details of purchasers and acceptors of EBs a day before the deadline.

However, the crucial unique identifier which could enable one to connect donees and donors, was missing from both the donors and donees' lists. The Supreme Court again hauled up SBI, and directed it to submit missing details by 21 March. Even without a definitive link between donors and donees, it appears that some companies have donated money after the visit of enforcement agencies. Others have donated money, before or after award of lucrative government contracts. Surprisingly, some companies seem to have donated money many times in excess of their net worth, pointing to them being fronts for others, indicating violation of both taxation and elec-

toral laws. The unique identifier may conclusively link donors to political parties, and if the quid pro quo is established, may result in penal action against a large number of corporates and political parties.

Ruling party politicians, including the Finance Minister and Home Minister, have defended the EB Scheme, denying any quid pro quo. Tacitly supporting the Ministers' stand, the CEC has harped on evolving a mechanism to 'protect donors' privacy' so that they were 'not harassed,' not considering that such an arrangement would be against the transparency in election funding, which everyone ostensibly wants to promote. Also, if Electoral Bonds were all that was promised, then why were so many instances of involvement of black money noticed in elections conducted after 2017?

One reason for the rot in the political system is that financial accounts of political parties are never audited by independent auditors, and all parties want the flawed status quo to continue. In a telling instance, after the Delhi High Court found that both the BJP and the Congress had illegally accepted foreign donations, both parties cooperated in nullifying the High Court judgement by retrospectively amending the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act.

Looking to the ever-increasing size of electorates, politicians defend the use of money and muscle power by pointing to their need to contact a large number of voters spread over a vast geographical area, in limited time. Voters say that they sell their votes, because candidates do not entertain them after elections get over. Obviously, for a personal connect between the electors and the elected, constituencies need to be smaller. To reduce the importance of money power, the amount spent by a political party could be added to the candidate's expenditure. Concomitantly, electoral spending limits should be reduced, to the level that only door-to-door canvassing is possible within the limited budget. Also, legislators changing parties should immediately lose their membership, and CAG should audit the accounts of all political parties. Limiting the role of big money in elections will definitely lessen corruption in public life. As Steven Magee, author and environmentalist, had observed: "Most politicians are corrupt as they do not represent the masses that voted for them, but rather they choose to return numerous favours to the corporations that funded their election campaigns."



DEVENDRA SAKSENA
The writer is a retired Principal Chief Commissioner of Income-Tax

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Not for India

SIR, This refers to your editorial, "Simultaneous polls" published on 18 March. The concept of 'One Nation, One Election', which has generated a lot of debate in recent times, especially after the recommendations made by the Ramnath Kovind panel, cannot be feasible and pragmatic for a huge democracy and a secular nation like India. Such a theory involves not only practical challenges, but also complex legal and constitu-

tional considerations. Our Constitution prescribes fixed terms for various legislative bodies, making the harmonization of their election schedules a constitutional matter. It also necessitates cooperation and consensus among States, each with its unique political dynamics and concerns. The current diffused system allows each State to push its individual agenda during State elections, something that would be difficult

to do in collective polls. Also, separate State elections allow regional parties to attract voters in the gap between central polls, since one would be voting separately

for the Union and the State. ONOE will impact the voting judgment of the voters and this new process shall also require manpower and machinery on a

humongous scale. Importantly, with simultaneous elections, national issues will certainly dominate State issues, and such deliberations will adversely affect the federal nature of the Indian political system. In the final analysis, the present system has been consciously chosen by our forefathers to uphold the will of democracy by providing for regular elections, so that people can express their will through the right to vote.

Yours, etc.,
Ranganathan Sivakumar,
Chennai, 22 March.





Sordid scheme

Matching electoral bond purchasers and donors reveals cronyism, corruption

Following the Supreme Court of India-ordered release of the final tranche of data from the State Bank of India, it has now been possible to get a nearly complete picture of electoral financing, which was once an opaque route. The SBI had to release data of the unique numbers for electoral bonds purchased by corporate and individual donors and later encashed by political parties. That the SBI had to be prodded twice by the Court to release these chunks of data – in the first instance they were without the unique numbers that could connect donors with parties – is an indictment of the bank which had initially sought an extension till June 30, 2024, well after the general election, to release the information. On the other hand, it took only a few hours for news organisations to perform a simple data-matching exercise to connect the two sets of information – on the companies that had purchased the bonds and on the parties that had encashed them. A cursory look at the data reveals the inefficacy of the argument for the need for opacity of electoral bonds that had been propounded by the Union government, but one soundly rejected by the Court. For one, there seems to be a clear correlation between large donations being made to certain political parties and bond purchasers receiving high-value infrastructure contracts. In some cases, there is strong correlation between entities being subject to actions or facing probes by the Enforcement Directorate and the Income-Tax Department, and later these entities or their representatives purchasing bonds. This is especially so for many donors who purchased these bonds that were later encashed by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

That the top 19 firms – based on the cumulative size of donations made – went on to invariably fund the BJP, besides other parties, from mid-2019 to February 2024 (22 firms donated ₹100 crore or more in this period) also suggests that the bonds were a device used to curry favour with the establishment. The presence of a unique identifier for these bonds in the hands of the SBI, which could allow it to keep an audit trail of transactions, and that the Finance Ministry had allowed certain bonds to be encashed even after their expiry date (within 15 days of the purchase date) showed that the scheme had also created undue advantage for the ruling party. It is clear that the bonds had skewed campaign and party financing heavily in the favour of the ruling party, besides putting a veil over the unscrupulous motivations for the donations. It is now incumbent upon civil society to enlighten the electorate about the scheme and to raise questions about the skewed nature of donations. This will just be the first step to cleansing the system.

Terror in Moscow

The Islamic State poses security challenges for the Eurasian region

The terror attack at the Crocus City Hall on the outskirts of Moscow on March 22, that killed at least 137 people, underscores the concerns that the Islamic State (IS), whose physical caliphate in Syria and Iraq was destroyed six years ago, is on a path to revival. In January, the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the Afghanistan-based arm of the Sunni jihadist group, had carried out twin bombings in Kerman, Iran, targeting a memorial event of General Qassem Soleimani, the Quds Force commander assassinated by the U.S. in January 2020. These bombings killed at least 80 people. Since then, the IS has targeted Turkey, Syria and Afghanistan, and the Moscow shooting points to its growing terror capabilities. The Russian authorities have charged four Tajik nationals. The IS-K, which was established in Afghanistan's Nangarhar province in 2015, is largely made up of Central Asian militants. This branch rose to prominence after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Since then, the IS-K has attacked Afghanistan's Shia minority, and sought to build a network of cells with radicalised youths from Central Asia and Afghanistan's Tajik and Uzbek minorities, who were angry with the Taliban's Pashtun regime. These networks are now gaining strength.

In recent months, the IS-K has run propaganda videos against Russia and President Vladimir Putin. The IS claims that the Russians spilled "the blood of Muslims" in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria. In Syria, Russia's intervention in 2015 turned the civil war around in favour of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, who the IS wanted to topple. If in 2013-14, al Qaeda in Iraq and the IS used anti-western propaganda to build networks across West Asia, today, the IS-K is using anti-Russian and anti-Iranian propaganda to find recruits among Central Asians, Afghans and Pakistanis. The group, which once controlled territories across Syria and Iraq, has now transformed itself into a traditional terrorist outfit that hides in chaos and strikes on the public. The back-to-back attacks pose a serious security challenge to the Eurasian region, especially for Russia, which hosts thousands of Central Asian migrant labourers. Mr. Putin, who rose to power in the late 1990s promising security to Russians battered by terror attacks, will have to plug the security loopholes. But that will not be enough. To tackle the IS, countries need to address the geopolitical conditions that help the IS regroup. As long as the Taliban continues its Pashtun-only rule over a diverse, radicalised Afghanistan, and instability, wars and lawlessness prevail in parts of West Asia, groups such as the IS would continue to find avenues to grow and strike.

T.M. Krishna, the stormy petrel of Carnatic music, and this year's winner of The Music Academy, Madras's prestigious Sangita Kalanidhi award, is an ardent artist and an avid activist.

As an artist he is rooted in tradition but his vision is new, seeking boundless horizons. He is nourished by the past but not circumscribed by it. Like a gushing mountain stream ever refreshing but bound by its banks. As an activist, both in the domain of music and on societal and civic issues, he espouses causes, amplifying the voice of the voiceless. He ruffles the feathers of the conservatives on the concert stage and those in power on civic platforms. Some would say he delights in poking the bull in the eyes.

The artiste's stage

Any concert of Mr. Krishna is always teasingly enchanting. It is also provoking, disturbing, awakening. It is a feast for the purists of the art form, delightful for the avant-garde and is full of surprises to the devout believers who are pantheistic in their outlook. But the religious fanatics bristle at his irreverence toward long-held beliefs and feel outraged. The atheists and agnostics celebrate his audacity when he cocks a snook at the conservatives. The old, who are true connoisseurs of classical music, grudgingly admire him, even though he is unconventional. Modern youth who are drawn to classical music and students of that art adore him.

He has a huge fan base. He is gifted, charismatic and daring. He is an iconoclast but his music and his views have evolved and are shaped by eclectic interests and deep research. He is an author of books on classical music, art and the artisans of classical musical instruments and their loving devotion to their age-old craft and their discrimination, alienation, neglect and obscurity. He is a prolific writer, tireless speaker on art and contemporary issues, and an intrepid activist. His works have drawn critical acclaim as well as ire.

His music and his repertoire of actions always baffle you. He is an unbeliever who mesmerises you when he sings devotional songs in temple festivals. He is an innovator and a disruptor who does not subvert. It is when he challenges and questions our cultural and social spaces in the realm of art and its orthodoxies, gender bias and casteism, its hypocrisies and its undercurrent of politics that are often exclusive, divisive and discriminatory and holds a mirror to us that we are offended.

He may be a non-conformist. He may at times be abrasive and arrogant. He may not draw universal praise but he sparks lively debate and enriches art by celebrating various genres – folk, puranic, classical, *Dasa* and *Vachana sahitya*,



Captain G.R. Gopinath

is a soldier, farmer and founder of Air Deccan

ancient and navodaya and Dalit poetry, Tamil songs, Sanskrit hymns and *shlokas* from epics, even Sufi, drawn from various languages and regions of India.

For instance, in one concert, in Bengaluru, after singing classical *ragas* and compositions of the Trinity (of Tyagaraja, Dikshitar and Syama Sastri) and Purandara Dasa and a bouquet of Tamil songs including one by Perumal Murugan, he sang a composition of saint reformer Narayana Guru from Kerala and a lilting, melodious Urdu bhajan on Kanhaiya (Krishna) by Pakistani poet Hafeez Jalandhari who has also penned the national anthem of Pakistan. This may have seemed sacrilegious to the orthodox. Mr. Krishna says music is universal.

He is a serious student of the art, a purist when he sings the major *ragas* and compositions, and one who is constantly experimenting and transcending himself in every concert by seeking to explore new frontiers. His mastery and rendition of *kritis*, *ragas*, *alapanas*, *tanam*, *pallavis*, *kalpanaswaras* and *neravals* are refreshing and cast a spell on the audience.

A polarisation

The most coveted Sangita Kalanidhi title conferred on him has stirred up a hornet's nest among musicians and music enthusiasts. In fact social media seems to be driving the polarisation among musicians along abominable lines: right-wing politics and religiosity pitted against the ideological left and liberals; zealots of Brahminical ways and 'Hindutva' persuasion versus the followers of Periyar. With the citadel of action being Chennai, even the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is ranged against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In the reactions in the world of music, the sisters, Ranjani and Gayatri, who are popular classical singers, were first off the block in going public about withdrawing from the annual conference later in the year, which is hosted by the Music Academy. Among the points they raised were that they could not overlook Mr. Krishna's glorification of an anti-Brahmin persona such as EVR (Periyar). Vidwan N. Ravikiran, recipient of the Sangita Kalanidhi in 2017 announced that he would return the award as Mr. Krishna was 'trying to polarise and destabilise Indian classical music'. A few authors with leanings toward the ideologies and politics of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh rallied behind these artistes and attacked the Music Academy for dishonouring itself by honouring a 'Brahmin hater' and rabble-rouser.

In a letter addressed to Ms. Ranjani and Ms. Gayatri, the President, The Music Academy, Madras, N. Murali, firmly stated that, "The choice of Sangita Kalanidhi made year after year is a prerogative of The Music Academy and has

always been made after careful deliberation, with the sole criterion being musical excellence demonstrated over a significant and sustained career. This year the Executive Committee of the Academy chose T.M. Krishna for this accolade based on his excellence in music over a long career, with no extraneous factors influencing our choice."

We will be smothering the creativity of future generations if, in the name of tradition, we cultivate a certain bigotry imprisoned by the habit of a past generation. True art is not a magnificent tomb brooding over the immemorial past. Music, like art, belongs to the procession of life, and is as different as a tree is from a seed. It is like the river, ever old and ever new. It has a wealth of inheritance. It must constantly evolve and burst forth with new blossoms and continually be nourished by the past.

Mr. Krishna may have erred in boycotting the Music Academy and the various sabbas during the December festival held every year just as those who are now withdrawing from the festival and returning their awards are likely to be making a similar mistake.

The role of the artiste

There are many artistes who are content and totally immersed only in their art and innovate within its confines. There are also others who are bold activist reformers who challenge their traditional art forms, fight the inequities and prejudices that prevail in communities and cultural spaces, and also speak out against injustices in society in the wider context of politics and government. History has many examples of great poets, artistes and philosophers who were all rebels who went beyond their chosen calling.

What is the role of an artiste when he becomes an activist and when those roles overlap? As Camus said eloquently, "Considered as artists, we perhaps have no role to play in the world. But considered as men, yes... We must simultaneously serve both suffering and beauty."

All those invested in music and the arts, and the Academy, the various vibrant sabbas that patronise artistes, and the artistes themselves must rise above their differences and come together with humility in a spiritual quest to enrich music through dialogue, debate and assimilation. We must leave our inheritance richer for future generations. Art can become a many-splendoured offering only through a cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures or it will languish because of 'intellectual incest'.

Boycotting and responding with misplaced chauvinism is churlish on both sides of the divide. To recall Tagore's words, "The role of an artist is to take a creative part in the festival of life, to give expression to the infinite in man."

The polarisation over the conferment of a title is unfortunate as music can become a many-splendoured offering only through a cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures

China, a 'want-to-be' superpower

The first anniversary of the China-brokered détente between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 passed without much fanfare. The war in Gaza has enveloped almost all regional political and diplomatic capacities across the Persian Gulf, while also highlighting international actors and their core interests amidst this fallout. Beijing has taken a position that is clearly pro-Palestine, in line with its historical standing on the issue, alienating its relations with Israel.

However, in China's state-controlled media, Chinese President Xi Jinping's success in bringing together Riyadh and Tehran was highlighted as an institutional Chinese position to promote peace. In a glowing piece on the anniversary which quoted regional analysts who underscored a sense of fatigue with the West's 'conditional' relations, the Chinese media outlet Xinhua said, "Today, China's advocacy for peace still resonates with Middle East countries."

Beijing's aims

A push towards 'mediation diplomacy' has been an aspirational design for China on two major fronts. First, it is to position itself as an antithesis to what Beijing sees as decades worth of western interventionist policies, specifically in a region such as West Asia, where conflict has direct correlation with colonial history. Second, it is to increase its own geopolitical weight as a responsible international actor and power. However, both these aims have been confronted by realities around the war in Gaza as China has taken a clear stance towards the Arab side and has not condemned Hamas by name. Much of the reasoning behind this is to counter long-standing American influence and to take advantage of crevasses in regional diplomacy, specifically by the likes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which are looking to chart their own paths of strategic autonomy and willing to partner with Beijing despite having close security ties with Washington DC.

In early 2023, Wang Yi (director of the Office of



Kabir Taneja

is Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation

the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee) gave his endorsement to a plan to set up a new China-backed international mediation organisation headquartered in Hong Kong. According to reports, Algeria, Belarus, Cambodia, Djibouti, Indonesia, Laos, Pakistan, Serbia and Sudan were signatories to the initial statement as a preparatory office was launched. The Chinese establishment hopes to link the mediation initiative to its expansive economic corridor, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI has extensive membership in West Asia as well, with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE among others being part of China's economic highways. Israel, being heavily reliant on the United States for its security, is not a signatory. However, Israel's embattled Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aired the fact last year that China had invited him for a state visit.

China's absence in the Red Sea crisis

The war in Gaza has drawn strong red lines between China and Israel. This raises interesting questions on the exact role Beijing played in the Saudi-Iran détente. The probability of China being pulled into the process by Riyadh and Tehran, rather than actively brokering a deal, remains high. China has also been absent through the crisis in the Red Sea, where predominantly western naval forces have attempted to maintain the free flow of trade in this critical waterway. Contrarily, reports have suggested that Yemen-based Houthis were not targeting Chinese and Russian ships, suggesting a bypass potentially using leverages that Beijing has with its close partner Iran despite Tehran's calls for the Yemeni militia to cease attacks. If so, it shows China's crafty diplomacy was to predominantly protect its own interests and not wade into the crisis as an influential power looking to use its position to broker peace or even a ceasefire. Much of this kind of actual heavy lifting remains at the doorsteps of the White House.

This then begs the question. What is China's

actual role in the more challenging geopolitical regions such as West Asia? Beijing's support for the Palestinian cause without criticising Hamas practically aligns with the larger Arab posture. This stands against U.S. support for Israel, which is increasingly being criticised for its absolutist nature as the body count in Gaza continues to grow. China's intent for 'mediation' is non-existent in high-stake conflicts and is un-aspirational beyond the strategic aim of showcasing western, and, more specifically, American power and influence, as detrimental to both international stability and security.

In perspective

China seems content with predominantly displacing American hegemony without replacing it. Even a perception of being a 'soft hegemon' in the region will stand starkly against Chinese grandstanding against western policies. This is despite the fact that Beijing utilised the 'war on terror'-era to build closer ties with the U.S. and benefit its own security concerns regarding radicalisation and terrorism narratives around its restive Xinjiang region. But once again, these were all narrow geostrategic aims. Scholars Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Isaac Kardon have highlighted in their work on how China, for its partner states, is more about their internal security rather than external – that is, prioritising political security of regimes rather than states. Arguably, this could appropriately explain what formalised Chinese mediation would aim for.

The war in Gaza colours Beijing as still being a 'want-to-be' superpower. Being risk averse and having a lack of alternatives to the historical West-centric policies (which it chides as being detrimental to global security and prosperity) makes Beijing stand out as hollow. Other than offering a sizeable cheque book, China still has few answers as substitutes to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints. For now, despite its size, it remains a utilitarian superpower for others to hedge against rather than being an upcoming traditional superpower.

Other than dangling a cheque book, Beijing seems risk averse and has few answers to long-standing geopolitical flashpoints

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Arrest, rally plan

The decision of the INDIA bloc to take out a rally to protest the arrest of Delhi Chief Minister and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal (March 25) is ill-conceived. The contention that the arrest is political vendetta is unimpressive especially as Mr. Kejriwal did not respond to the Enforcement

Directorate's summons. Had he responded to the summons on time, he would have been in a position of strength. One must also not forget that unless the ED has substantial proof, it does not accost an individual. There must be enough material with the ED to hold Mr. Kejriwal guilty. The

protest rally will be a blot on Mr. Kejriwal's persona as a clean politician.

V. Lakshmanan,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

The planned rally by the INDIA bloc on March 31 will send a strong signal to the ruling party at the Centre after the series of moves against the Aam Aadmi

Party. There are other vital issues that can be raised. With the BJP emerging unchallenged, there needs to be a movement with resolute aim to take on the party.

M.Y. Shariff,
Chennai

What makes Mr. Kejriwal's arrest particularly alarming

is the striking resemblance it bears to the tactics employed during the Emergency era. It also highlights the broader erosion of democratic norms in India. His arrest must serve as a rallying point for all who cherish freedom and democracy.

Aryan Gulati,
Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

Speech and remarks

Our political representatives seem to be breaching the line in their election speeches by using abusive language and being critical in a derogatory and harmful manner. Speech is a mighty force and our leaders must be mindful of this.

A.J. Rangarajan,
Chennai

Understanding what the right to equality promises

The rules of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, were recently notified. This law has been challenged before the Supreme Court on the grounds that it violates Article 14 of the Constitution. Both opposition to it and support for it have drowned a key aspect of this case. This is an opportunity for the Court to fundamentally reshape not just the citizenship law, but also the way in which it judges alleged violations of the constitutional guarantee of equality.



Aditya Phalnikar

is a Research Fellow at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. Views expressed are personal

The classification test

The classical test to judge these violations is the 'reasonable classification' test, where the Court asks whether there is a clear way to differentiate members of one class from another, and then whether there is a clear relation between making this distinction and achieving the goal that the government wishes to achieve. When the Bill was being debated in Parliament, the Home Minister had declared that it was consistent with the test given above – it applied to persecuted minorities who had fled to India from geographically connected nations, and the purpose was to provide these minorities with full citizenship rights in India. His argument is not legally unsound. One could, of course, argue that the 'persecuted minorities' argument ought to extend to, say, the Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan as well. This would ordinarily be fatal to the Home Minister's argument. But the Court has generally allowed a great deal of latitude to the state while dealing with a potential equality law violation. In *Charanjit Lal Chowdhury v. Union of India* (1950), for instance, the Court declared that "the Legislature is free to recognise degrees of harm and it may confine its restrictions to those cases where the harm is deemed to be the clearest." If we go by this standard, the CAA might be constitutional. And that is

The Court has an opportunity to reshape not just the citizenship law, but also the way in which it judges alleged violations of our constitutional guarantee of equality

where the problem lies.

The classification test is a judicial import from the U.S. dating back to 1950. It has since been crystallised, refined, developed, and critiqued to the point where it has become an inseparable part of equality jurisprudence. Indeed, from being a way of interpreting our equality guarantee, it has almost become our equality guarantee.

What is forgotten is that the classification test is a tool that the Court employs to decide what state action would violate equality. The real protection afforded by the Constitution, however, is not the test; it is what the test is used for. Equality is a moving target, and the reasonable classification test was developed to hit it most accurately. But this does not always happen. The CAA may pass this test, and yet not satisfy our constitutional conscience. The source of our pain is the fact that there are some persecuted minorities who are excluded for no apparent reason. This is unsettling also because the discrimination here is on the basis of religion, which is against any understanding of secularism.

The classification test, in its most repeated form, does not necessarily account for any of this. This is not to say that it never can. While reading down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, as he was then, stated that Article 14 contains "a powerful statement of values", and that to "reduce it to a formal exercise of classification may miss the true value of equality". Other judges have also attempted to augment the classification test with more teeth. But these responses are stopgap. The test is either bent to suit more just outcomes, or a new test is developed. The 'manifest arbitrariness' test developed by the Court in recent cases is a response of the latter kind, and is unfortunately too broad to provide any concrete guidance. Unlike the reasonable classification test, it has no shape or form. The most

that the Court has said about the content of this test is that what is "without adequate determining policy or principle" is manifestly arbitrary. These concepts are, on the face of it, susceptible to multiple interpretations – hardly a suitable fit for a judicial test which is supposed to crystallise an ethereal concept like equality.

What is required instead is a comprehensive re-understanding of what the right to equality promises. This does not necessarily mean that the old test needs erasure, but it needs a radical redevelopment. The Court needs to go beyond asking the questions it already does. It will have to develop the constitutional idea of equality more thoroughly. The old idea of 'treating equals equally and unequals unequally' has shown its deficiencies. This will be a deeply theoretical exercise, but it is necessary for a more robust constitutionalism.

The Court will also have to ask more probing questions of the state, such as why Ahmadiyya Muslims have been excluded and the exact number of immigrants who have come from each of these countries (from each religion). Each of these will test the state's purported justifications against the new idea of equality. These questions may be asked in the classification test as well, but are not its core components. Their application depends upon active judicial engagement with the values flowing from Article 14. Leaving crucial questions of constitutional law open to such discretion is incorrect. This is the core of the problem.

Opportunity for a clear break

The legal and constitutional challenge to CAA is a timely opportunity for this task because the Act goes against many of our beliefs of what equality entails, and what the Constitution requires from the government. Questions of this magnitude are better answered with a clear distinction between the right and the test. Only the former is inviolable.

The LDF's big weapon against the UDF

The anti-Citizenship (Amendment) Act debates have given the Left Front a boost

STATE OF PLAY

S.R. Praveen
praveen.sr@thehindu.co.in

On March 11, when the Union government notified the rules for the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019, just days ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, there was little doubt about its real intent. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with an eye on votes, proudly owned the move, the reaction of its Kerala unit has been muted given the significant minority population in the State.

The ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala was quick to criticise the CAA and place itself as the bulwark against the Sangh Parivar's designs, followed by the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), even though both the fronts called the notification a diversion from the electoral bonds issue. While the LDF government reiterated that the CAA and the National Register of Citizens will not be implemented in Kerala, Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee president K. Sudhakaran said that the CAA will be "thrown into the Arabian Sea" if INDIA comes to power.

All of a sudden, every other election issue, whether the LDF's campaign over the Union government's alleged financial embargo of Kerala or the UDF's long list of complaints about the State government, seem to have been pushed to the background with the CAA taking the spotlight. Over the past week, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has addressed anti-CAA rallies in various districts. The UDF has also been organising protest marches, especially in the northern districts, which



have a higher concentration of minorities.

The State government has also moved the Supreme Court seeking an injunction against the implementation of the CAA, saying it will lead to hostile discrimination. Mr. Vijayan, who has branded the law a challenge to the very idea of India, has portrayed it as part of the Sangh Parivar's long-time agenda of turning Muslims into second-class citizens by taking away their basic rights. He has also lashed out at the Congress saying the party had not put up sufficient resistance against the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill in Parliament and outside.

In December 2019, at the beginning of the anti-CAA movement, Mr. Vijayan and Ramesh Chennithala, who was the Opposition leader, had led a joint protest. The Kerala Assembly had also unanimously passed a resolution against the Bill. But since then, the INDIA bloc partners do not see eye to eye on this issue. The current Opposition leader, V.D. Satheesan, has accused the Chief Minister of misleading the public and has asserted that Congress MPs have strongly protested against the CAA. States have little role in implementing the CAA and only a Congress-led INDIA bloc government can annul it, he added.

Mr. Satheesan also questioned Mr. Vijayan's own sincerity in opposing CAA, as the government failed to with-

draw the cases registered against people, numbering about 800, who were part of anti-CAA protests in 2019. To this charge, Mr. Vijayan responded saying 629 of these cases were quashed by the courts, and the government has already agreed to withdraw 84 others. The only cases that have not been withdrawn are those involving serious offences, he said.

BJP State President K. Surendran believes that the withdrawal of cases against anti-CAA protesters is part of the LDF's attempts at minority appeasement. The BJP is also planning to approach the Election Commission of India over the alleged violations of the Model Code of Conduct in withdrawing these cases. Mr. Surendran has reiterated the national leadership's argument that the CAA does not deny citizenship to any particular community.

The debate is expected to have a bearing on the voting patterns of the State's minority population. For the LDF, the anti-CAA debates have helped push to the sidelines discussions on contentious State-specific issues that could drive anti-incumbency. The debates have also given the LDF, which won just one seat in 2019, yet another opportunity to question the Congress's genuineness on issues concerning minorities, such as the national leadership's dithering over the Ayodhya temple consecration, as well as the large number of defections of Congress leaders to the BJP. The Congress is still struggling to shed its "soft Hindutva" tag. In 2019, the minorities overwhelmingly voted in favour of the UDF following Rahul Gandhi's candidature from Wayanad, but it remains to be seen whether such a wave can be recreated this time.

Water levels less than 25% in many major dams in the south

With most major dams in the State filled to close to 50% of their capacity, Kerala is the only exception

DATA POINT

Rebecca Rose Varghese
& **Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

Most of the major reservoirs in the southern States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana are filled to only 25% of their capacity or less. This is worrying as peak summer is round the corner. Some large dams such as the Tungbhadra in Karnataka and the Nagarjuna Sagar on the Andhra Pradesh-Telangana border are filled to 5% or less of their full capacity. Other large dams such as Mettur in Tamil Nadu and Srisaialam on the Andhra Pradesh-Telangana border are also filled to less than 30% of their capacity. The water crisis in Bengaluru may soon hit other urban centres and rural areas if this situation continues in the following days.

Across India, the current water level in 150 primary reservoirs put together as a share of their total capacity stood at 38%, according to the latest weekly bulletin by the Central Water Commission. **Chart 1** shows a region-wise comparison of the current storage levels as a share of the total capacities of reservoirs. It also compares the current water levels with last year's levels, as well as with the 10-year average.

The chart shows that the southern region is impacted the most. All the reservoirs put together are filled to only 23% of their capacity in this region, which is about 17% points lower than the levels recorded last year and 9 points lower than the 10-year average. No other region – central, west, east, or north – shows such a drastic difference in levels compared to last year as well as the 10-year average. For instance, in the northern and central regions, the reservoirs are filled to 33% and 46% of their capacities, respectively, similar to the 10-year average levels recorded in those regions. In the western re-

gion, the reservoirs are filled to 45% of their capacity, slightly higher than their 10-year average, while the 49% recorded in the eastern region was only marginally lower than the 10-year average.

Among the southern States, a comparison of the capacities of individual reservoirs with their current storage shows that water levels in many are dangerously low. **Charts 2, 3, and 4** show the current storage levels as a share of the total capacity of major dams (chosen based on their capacities), in Andhra Pradesh-Telangana, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The list is limited to those reservoirs observed by the Central Water Commission in these States.

The Linganamakki reservoir in Karnataka's Shivamogga district, with a total capacity of 4.3 lakh crore litres of water, is currently filled to just 22%. The Supa reservoir in Karnataka's Uttara Kannada district, with a total capacity of 4.1 lakh crore litres, is filled to only 36%. The Srisaialam reservoir on the Andhra Pradesh-Telangana border, with a capacity of 6 lakh crore litres, is filled to only 15%, whereas the Nagarjuna Sagar dam on the same border, with a capacity of 5.1 lakh crore litres, is filled to a mere 4%.

The Mettur dam in Salem district of Tamil Nadu, with a full capacity of 2.65 lakh crore litres, is filled to 28%. Kerala is the only exception among the southern States, with most of its major dams filled to at least 50% of their capacities, as shown in **Chart 5**. The Idukki reservoir is filled to 47%, the Idamalayar dam to 48%, and the Kallada and Kakki reservoirs to 50%.

It is important to note that, like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, most districts in Kerala too recorded deficient rainfall during the south-west monsoon last year, as shown in **Table 6**.

In troubled waters

The data for the charts were sourced from the latest weekly bulletin published by the Central Water Commission

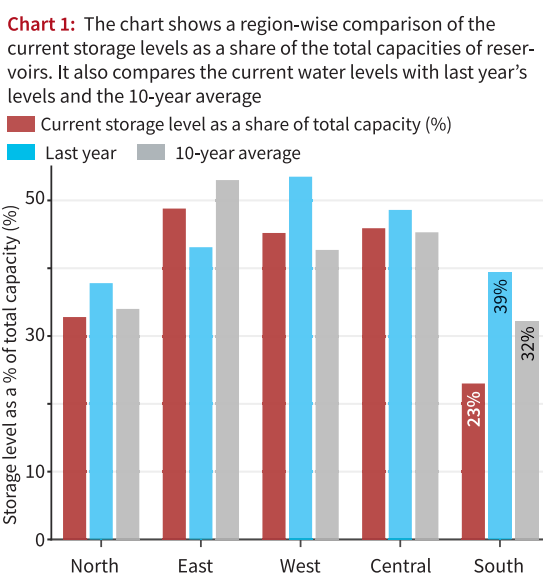
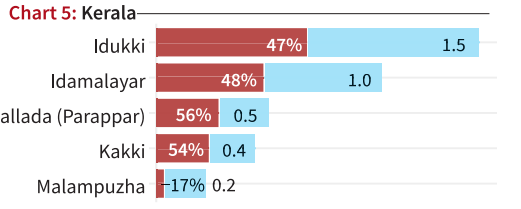
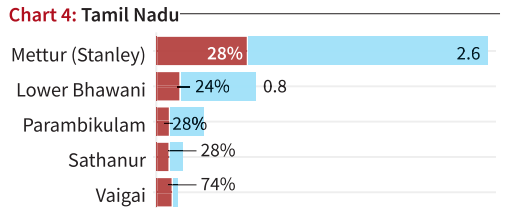
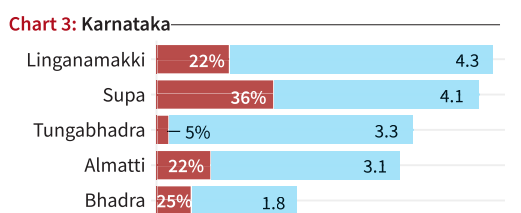
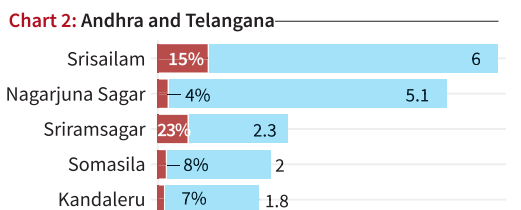


Table 6: The table shows the % of districts, across various levels of rainfall deficits, during the 2023 south-west monsoon. For instance, in about 27% districts of Kerala, rainfall deficit during last monsoon was 40% or more

State	Deficit				No deficit
	40% or more	25%-40%	15%-25%	<15%	
Andhra	5%	5%	32%	21%	37%
Karnataka	6%	13%	48%	26%	6%
Kerala	27%	20%	40%	13%	-
Tamil Nadu	3%	11%	13%	16%	58%
Telangana	-	7%	2%	27%	63%

Chart 2,3,4,5: The charts show the current storage levels as a share of the total capacity of major dams in southern States



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 26, 1974

'Base in Indian Ocean will create tension'

Madras, March 25: Vice-Admiral K.L. Kulkarni Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, said here to-day that the Indian Ocean had been declared an area of peace and a 1971 United Nations resolution supported it. If the super-powers and the regional powers patrolled this area, "certainly there will be a lot of tension, and we will be very much concerned about it," he added.

The Vice-Admiral told a press conference that the Government of India's policy was quite clear on this issue, in that the Indian Ocean should be a zone of peace.

Replying to a question, the Vice-Admiral said: "Diego Garcia does not directly affect our defence capabilities. It does affect, if tensions are created in the area by the movement of ships belonging to the super-powers. The littoral States in the Gulf area are arming themselves with the latest sophisticated weapons, and in the context of the geographical situation in which India is placed, it will certainly affect us."

The Vice-Admiral pointed out that France and the Soviet Union had stated that they would send their ships to cruise in the Indian Ocean. "It is our area much more than others," he said.

The Vice-Admiral said the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were the "eastern sentinel" of the country and "their defence is my major concern at the Eastern Naval Commander."

He said negotiations were in an advanced stage regarding collaboration arrangements with certain foreign countries to build patrol boats. Once the decision was taken, the Mazagon Docks at Bombay would be entrusted with building these boats.

Replying to questions he said a new era of naval aviation would be developed in the 1980s. The Indian Navy's aircraft carrier was certainly not out-dated. "What we need is modern types of aircraft that can be deployed from the ship," he added.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 26, 1924

Steel pipes for Tatas

London, Mar. 25: An order which is stated to be the biggest of its kind ever placed in Britain and perhaps in the world has been lodged with the British Mannesmann Tube Company for steel pipes in connection with the Tata Hydroelectric Scheme.



A thought for today

Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative

HG WELLS

Time To Step Back

RBI's policy interest rate is out of sync with data. It needs to be lowered

The last time RBI's monetary policy committee increased its policy rate (repo) was in Feb last year. Since then, it's been stuck at 6%. The economy in the meantime has seen two positive trends, growth has trended upwards while inflation rate is moderating. It raises the question if MPC needs to reconsider its stance on interest rate when it meets next week.

What forecasts say | RBI's main mandate is to keep inflation within the target set by GOI. It's in a comfortable position now. In the current month's bulletin, the central bank has forecast that average inflation rate in 2024-25 will be 4.4% and GDP will expand at 7.4%. So, RBI's view is inflation will moderate even as GDP expands at a relatively fast pace.

Wrinkles in the data | India's GDP data presents policy makers with two challenges. Supply in the economy is measured by gross value added (GVA). Growth rate of GVA is an indicator of what's happening to producers. This measure has moved in a direction at odds with the better-than-expected growth of GDP. In the first three quarters of 2023-24, GVA growth rate trended downwards to record 6.5% in the Oct-Dec period. GDP, during the same period, trended upwards. Separately, private consumption growth has remained weak.

What's driving inflation | RBI's analysis on inflation shows that it's largely been supply side factors that contributed to inflation in the last two years. MPC commentary indicates the committee remains wary of food price shocks pushing inflation.

It doesn't add up | Food price surges in the recent past have largely been caused by perishables with relatively short production cycles. There's nothing RBI can do about that. What does matter is that these surges haven't led to the overall inflation remaining sticky at levels beyond RBI's mandated level of tolerance. Moreover, RBI expects the overall inflation rate to head downwards in the next year.

Case to lower interest rates | Recent price trends, RBI's inflation forecast and factors causing inflation do not justify interest rates at the current level. MPC should consider rolling back its rate increases. Liquidity needs to be adjusted in line with it. A rate cut now will benefit India's producers and consumers. Monetary policy is meant to be data driven. The message is clear. It's time to begin the process of lowering policy interest rates.

A Bridge Stranger Than Any Fiction

Mumbaikars recently found themselves with two flyovers where they would need to jump 2 metres to get from one to the other. Here is a brief but telling account of how BMC managed this feat

Zoru Bhathena



Mumbai is blessed to have a fantastic local rail network. The curse is to find a way to cross these tracks. Andheri, in the suburbs, has the population of a mini city, and just one bridge to cross the railway lines. The now infamous Gokhale Bridge, which has given a filip to stand-up comedy like no other

This is thanks to Mumbai's municipal corporation, BMC. Which works in very strange ways. Here is a brief sketch of how it delivered the Gokhale Bridge fiasco to us.

First came a collapse | Gokhale Bridge was serving the east-west commuting needs of Andheri residents for decades, when on one ill-fated day in 2018, the pedestrian pathway along this bridge collapsed. Killing several people. The collapse was symbolic for all that BMC stands for: ill-maintained urban infra loaded beyond capacity.

● BMC, in their ever-wise wisdom to spend maximum public money, decided to demolish and reconstruct the entire bridge.

● As the bridge was being rebuilt, railways directed BMC to build the new bridge 2 metres higher, to enable taller local trains to run below, in the future. Sidebar: Won't this future demand raising the heights of all the bridges?

Then a demolition | As this was a critical east-west bridge that could not be shut down, BMC was forced to carry out the bridge reconstruction in phases, allowing traffic to flow across in single lanes.

● One half side of the bridge was demolished and the east and west side-bridge access ramps were built during the period 2019-2022. Now the main bridge across the railway lines remained.

● Instead of using their engineering skills to build the new bridge, BMC used its wit. The moment Morbi Bridge collapsed in Gujarat, our dearest BMC declared Gokhale Bridge unsafe and shut it down. Despite written certification from IIT & VJTI declaring it as safe.

Next came promises | Having shut the bridge down, BMC made bold statements that the new bridge would

be completed in six months.

● But six months later, Mumbaikars found that the steel hadn't even been ordered, let alone fabricated.

● Absurd excuses were shared that the steel factory had gone on strike and that the girder fabrication factory had flooded.

Band baaja followed | Finally, in end July 2023, different parts of the bridge arrived in Mumbai, duly welcomed by BMC with a celebratory baraat-

End Oct 23 for bridge assembly, end Nov 23 to push the assembled bridge across the tracks, end Dec 23 for bridge opening (Phase-1).

2023 came and went, and Mumbaikars were left breathless - by the lack of work pace. So, some of us decided to get on to the ground and check what was going on. And, what a shock it was!

Heart-breaking anti-climax | BMC had built the western access ramp for Gokhale Bridge. But they hadn't connected the adjoining flyover. There was a 2-metre gap at the sky-junction of these two bridges.

● On the eastern side, another brand new flyover had developed cracks, without a single lever ever using it.

● The road below the new flyover was just one-lane wide and was in terrible condition.

● The pedestrian pathway across Gokhale Bridge was just 1.5 persons wide. Making it impossible for two people to pass each other whilst walking across!

Shambles and slumber | A bridge that was six years in the making was nearing completion, and every access around it was in a shambles!

● BMC finally awoke from their slumber and made superficial repairs to get the Phase-1 motor car ready.

● But, no sign of any work on Phase-2.

● No sign of fixing the 2-metre bridge-mismatch.

● No sign of proper to & fro



MIND THE GAP: People on Gokhale Bridge look down at Barfiwala flyover

type band.

● These different parts of the bridge were to be assembled together at a sky assembly site. Yet, the sky-assembly site was not kept ready.

● Few weeks later, after the assembly site was finally ready, BMC found that they didn't have ground space for crane movement.

● So, they set about to demolish the structures adjoining the bridge work site. In true JCB-govt style, demolition of the adjoining homes and offices happened in a record three days. Mumbaikars heaved a sigh of relief.

Aspirational timeline | In Sep 2023, BMC arranged a special meeting at the work site where citizens were able to discuss the ongoing work. Final dates were given.

Carnatic Musicians Are Out Of Tune

An artiste questioned poor practices in India's robust classical traditions. But that's not attacking the art

Malini Nair



Some artistes in the Carnatic universe rose in mutiny against awarding of Music Academy's prestigious Sangeeta Kalanidhi award to vocalist TM Krishna. His criticism of the Carnatic ecosystem and its discriminatory practices vilified its artistes and institutions, they said, as they pulled out of academy performances this season. One artiste returned his Sangeeta Kalanidhi, a legendary percussionist's son returned his late father's award.

"The king Akbar adorned the throne at a time when there were auspicious planets all around. Even wicked people started serving the king by holding his umbrella. His kingdom is like a heaven... The king removes all...suffering. Tanasena - the composer - blesses the king for having such fortune." That was Tansen's eulogy to his employer Akbar, translated by ethnomusicologist Bonnie Wade.

That pro-establishment paean came from one of the earliest and greatest superstars of the classical firmament. Nothing much has changed across five centuries, as is evident from the backlash against Krishna. With few exceptions, Indian classical musicians tend to pick reverence and adoration over questioning and inquiry of their icons and systems. Anything that's 500 years old can't be up for assessment, right?

There are two common responses when our high arts run into excesses of the establishment: claim the ivory tower's protection, because a spiritual practice cannot afford to get its hands dirty. Or jump right into it and compose adulatory songs or choreographies. In-between lies the possibility of sitting back and introspecting, which, somehow, is simply not acceptable.

Some years ago, Oliver Craske published *Indian Sun*, a biography of sitar legend Ravi Shankar. There were horrified gasps in classical circles at the revelations around his promiscuity, possibility of sexual abuse as a child, of the many infidelities. Can a guru of his stature be reduced to a man? Why do we have to be told these stories?

Much of the outrage over TMK's 'destruction' of figures of Carnatic system is not so much what he said, as how he dared say it. Why is it unthinkable for a seasoned artiste to critically assess the life and work of the greats in India's cultural history? How is it an insult to wonder if the unsurpassed MS Subbulakshmi's creative trajectory was dictated by choices she had to make as a woman from a marginalised community of her time? This was not vilification. It was an act of re-spectful inquiry into the life and art of an adored icon.

In *Sebastian and Sons*, Krishna uses revered mridangist Palghat Mani Iyer to point out the unbridgeable gap between 'untouchable' men and women engaged in instrument making, and those using those instruments to reach great heights of artistry.

To raise questions, discuss - and disagree - courteously and logically - these should be the hallmarks of a dynamic arts system. You don't have to agree, but does he have the right to say it, if he is arguing it through? Yes, absolutely. His

questions have created pockets of change, but certainly haven't brought down edifices of Carnatic music.

A little over a decade ago, Krishna's *A Southern Music* raised issues that were evident but barely discussed. The Carnatic system is buoyant and energetic, and it seemed like a fair, egalitarian space, but it held advantages for caste, class and gender. Instead of agreeing or refuting it with proof to the contrary, the musician community simply closed ranks and sulked.

The Hindustani system doesn't even have that one figure of critical inquiry. All discourse is limited to unquestioning deference towards the '5,000-year-old' legacy. An astounding music system, but it comes with its problems that can, and should be probed, and preferably by its stalwarts, to keep it robust. In *The Disciple*, filmmaker Chaitanya Tamhane dared to talk of the existential challenges of being a student of Hindustani music, the pangs of learning a formidable genre of music, finding a livelihood in it, and combining the ideal with the real.

The film brought a collective moan of dismay from the community. Why show a music that already has dwindling audiences in 'poor light'? Why not be more 'positive'?

Every robust culture confidently encourages criticism, research and inquiry. Surely our great arts are not so fragile that they'll crumble under the tentative breath of a question. The tragedy is not that TMK is taking a critical look at the classical arts, but that he is the only one doing it.

Broken Politics

Kerala and Karnataka take judicial route against GOI. Political channels seem shut

Over the weekend, Kerala and Karnataka approached Supreme Court to file complaints against GOI. Kerala challenged the President's action to withhold assent to four bills cleared by the legislature after the state's governor referred it to her. The President is guided by GOI's advice. Separately, Karnataka filed a writ petition alleging that the state has been denied assistance under drought management rules. Relations between GOI and opposition-administered states have been rocky. But these two cases take us into dangerous territory.

Centre first but states matter | The Constitution places Centre above states and gives it special powers such as deciding state borrowing limits. But states are, by constitutional design, integral to governance. They have authority over fundamental governance functions such as provision of law and order.

Division of powers | Legislative powers between the two levels of government are divided on the basis of a union list, state list and a concurrent list, where power is exercised jointly. Since mid-1950s, there's been creeping centralisation. Union and concurrent lists have expanded through constitutional amendments, while the state list has shrunk. Now, in a political environment marked by distrust, this is a source of Centre-state conflict.

Money problems | One area where the conflict plays out prominently is in share of revenue. The last finance commission said GOI raised 63% of resources but incurred 37% of expenditure. Therefore, FCs play a role in finding a balance between resources and expenditure of the two levels of govt. Recent face-offs have been about whether GOI is following the spirit of FC recommendations.

Friction in a federal set up is not unusual. But the risk today is that political channels of resolution have broken down. These matters shouldn't go to court. That they do shows the failure of politics.

Sparkling H2O to none

Bengaluru socialites now brag about showers, not LVs

Shinie Antony



Bengaluru is that crow in a fable who drops pebbles into a pot to raise the water level. As the city emerges blinking into the harsh sunlight, dry-mouthed and parched, the forecast is dystopian. At first the taps had coughing fits, then they spat out a thin black liquid, running dry thereafter with a death rattle. Tanker trucks are sloshing through the city streets with 'Drinking Water' written on them. They are stationed in even the poshest colonies with their hose sticking out. Investment advisers have shifted portfolios from money to water: how to save H2O. Once you carried a Louis Vuitton bag, now you brag about a shower.

In most parts of India, the weather swings between two extremes - in a sweat today, in a sweater tomorrow. Crops die because there is too much water or too little. And no one seems to be in charge of rainwater harvesting or monitoring groundwater. Out of the 14,781 borewells in Bengaluru, 3,297 are *katti*. Water has gone from still or sparkling to nil and none. Supply only meets half the demand. Posters in apartments are begging everyone to bathe once in two days. Soon they will provide sponges. Tenants are banned from carwash and Holi outsourced to hotels. Time's right for someone to turn wine into water!

Kempe Gowda, the city's 16th-century founder, got us the cascading lakes - but only after we promised to name a future airport after him. Today many lakes have either evaporated or filled up with sewage. Brokers used to sell flats with a 'Cauvery water available', which changed to 'Cauvery-tank mix'. Now they forward location map of the river in case anyone insists on Cauvery water. While Iblur lake and Agara lake demurely provide 'lakeview' status to nearby buildings, bad-boy Bellandur lake foams throughout the year and occasionally catches fire. The Land of a Thousand Lakes has applied for a name change. 'Dune: Part 3' is one of the suggestions.

Water has officially entered the black market. No more headlines about the IT sector or jazzy new startups from this city - it is all about water scarcity. Monsoons are late and mercury the highest it's been in five years. No puddles for little kids to jump into and adults are sentimental about the last time they added water to their drink. We are now spending water like money.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

Happiness... is not something that can be demanded from life, and if you are not happy you had better stop worrying about it and see what treasures you can pluck from your own brand of unhappiness.

Robertson Davies

About Time You Knew Your Real Worth

Jaya Row

A beggar used to beg outside a busy train station. One day a man approached him and offered to buy his begging bowl for ₹2,000. The beggar refused. The man then offered ₹10,000. The beggar was not interested. After a few days the man convinced the beggar to sell it for a princely sum of ₹25,000. The beggar was happy as he would not have to beg any more. The man was ecstatic. He had obtained an antique bowl worth millions.

We are like the beggar, oblivious of our real worth. We waste our lives in petty, insignificant preoccupations when we are sitting on a goldmine. We find pleasure in little acquisitions, unaware that we are heir to infinite bliss. We are content with incremental progress. We need to take that mighty leap and commit ourselves to exponential growth.

When your mind is focused on the body, you experience the lowest quality of joy. You can enjoy sense objects only as long as there is contact with them. Move to emotional thrills and physical inconveniences no longer matter. When a teenager falls in love, she becomes indifferent to food. Identify with an intellectual ideal and you experience much greater joy. A sportsperson dedicated to tennis celebrates an opponent's brilliance as if it were his own. And when you identify with the Spirit within you attain infinite Bliss.

Begin by expanding your mind. Rise above paltry issues and espouse a higher cause. Think big. Become a giver, not a taker. An automobile component manufacturer decided to improve the quality of their products. They won the coveted Deming Prize. The following

year they helped eight other companies to improve their quality. Thus, India became the hub for automobile component manufacture! Selfishness leads to failure. Rise above thought of self and excellence flows from you. The law is that all takers are unhappy. Givers are the happy ones. And you grow into a towering personality.

Enlarge your circle of love. Go beyond the narrow confines of your family to accommodate your community, country, the world. The whole world becomes your family - vasudhaiva kutumbakam. The higher you go, the more successful you become. Oneness makes for astounding results. Cooperation yields much better results than competition. Your happiness multiplies.

Understand the futility of worldly pursuits. Then you develop mumukshatva, the desire for

liberation. Plato describes people living in a dark cave. One day a young man told his peers that there had to be something beyond the cave. The elders said there was nothing beyond their little world. He decided to explore and walked away. He reached a point where he was in pitch darkness. His conviction helped him continue. Finally, he came out into the open. He saw the sun, moon, stars, breathed ethereal air, and he was in bliss!

We are trapped in the world, ignorant of the Beyond. Do you visualise an exhilarating life beyond the boredom of your daily grind? The Bhagwad Gita speaks to you. It takes you step by step from mediocrity to Excellence. From drudgery to revelry. And from mortality to Immortality. Break free from your self-imposed prison and take off into the world of the Spirit.

For more inspiration from Jaya Row, visit www.vedantavision.org



THE SPEAKING TREE

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

PM's Bhutan visit

Reaffirming commitment to building stronger ties

BARELY 24 hours after putting off his trip to Bhutan due to heavy rain in the neighbouring country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi availed a spell of good weather to visit Thimphu. India's efforts to ensure that the bilateral ties did not enter a state of limbo were reciprocated by Bhutan, which conferred its highest civilian honour on PM Modi. As was expected, Bhutan PM Tshering Tobgay received his counterpart at the airport. In another indication that PM Modi's quick visit was a win-win proposition for both sides, both Tobgay and the Bhutan King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, were present to see him off.

These courtesies reflect the two countries' willingness to be receptive to each other's aspirations in a rapidly altering geopolitical landscape. Bhutan's expectation of more aid from India, the world's fastest-growing major economy, was met when PM Modi doubled the assistance for Bhutan's next Five-Year Plan. India will also shoulder the financial burden of the Gyalsung Initiative, an integrated training programme for Bhutan's youth. New Delhi is readily backing King Jigme's Gelephu Special Administrative Region Project by financing a railway line that will be connected to the plains of Assam.

However, India's steadfast commitment to Thimphu is inseparable from its security interests vis-à-vis China, as the Doklam standoff of 2017 had demonstrated. New Delhi has shown respect for Bhutan's sovereignty by revising the India-Bhutan Friendship Treaty to enable Thimphu to decide its own foreign policy. Understandably, Bhutan cannot keep itself away from greater diplomatic engagement. India had facilitated Bhutan's emergence from isolation by sponsoring its membership of the UN and the World Bank. The bonhomie among the leaders at Paro airport suggests that both sides will continue to synchronise their geopolitical moves.

Liquor tragedy

Combating underground trade a challenge

THE 21 deaths attributed to the consumption of poisonous liquor in Punjab's Sangrur district are a tragic reminder of the enormity of the illicit liquor trade. The setting up of a special investigation team and the registration of a case under Section 302 (murder) of the IPC are steps in the right direction; these must be backed by unwavering commitment to uncovering the network behind this criminal activity. The potential influence of such activities on the electoral process, as indicated by the police statement about a link to the Lok Sabha elections, is a disturbing prospect. This underscores the need for heightened vigil and measures to prevent the enticement of gullible voters for political gains. The intervention of the Election Commission and the National Human Rights Commission in the case should spur concerted action.

Over the years, Punjab has witnessed several such incidents. There was a spate of illicit liquor trade-related deaths in Tarn Taran, Amritsar and Batala in 2020 — the toll crossed 110 — leading to a clamour for holding the authorities accountable. Two years later, the Supreme Court expressed dissatisfaction over the progress of the probe into the case and pulled up the state government for treating the issue with 'kid gloves'. In February 2023, the Punjab and Haryana High Court said it was a known fact that the illegal liquor trade was a serious problem in Punjab.

The recurrence of such tragedies shows that the challenges persist despite a campaign to crack down on bootleggers. Sustained action is needed, including stringent law enforcement to curb the illegal, parallel sale of liquor and meting out exemplary punishment to the culprits. Also, efforts must be made to raise consumer awareness about the hazards posed by the consumption of liquor purchased from unauthorised shops or persons.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 1924

A heated debate

THE animated debate which took place in the Council of State last week on the motion of Mr GA Natesan urging the Government of India to take effective steps to prevent the repeated attempts of the Union Government of South Africa to impose restrictions and disabilities on the Indian community shows at once the strength and unanimity of patriotic and self-respecting Indian opinion on the subject and the length of absurdity to which some Indians can go. The best and most outspoken speech on the occasion was, of course, that of Mr Srinivasa Sastri, to which we have already referred, and in which he made mincemeat of the plea that the Government of India and the British Government had done, were doing and might be trusted to do all that could possibly be done in this matter. The measure of what the British Government had done and was doing in this respect, said Mr Sastri, was its decision in respect of Kenya, which was a Crown Colony and in respect of which it had not even the excuse that, being a self-governing country, it could not be coerced into submission. As regards the Government of India, he expressed the definite and emphatic opinion that its policy of weak protest and mild remonstrance had not been and was not going to be of much avail. "I have come to the conclusion," he said, "that there might be some awakening of the British conscience, some rousing of a deeper sense of responsibility in the British nation if, on some occasion in the future, the Government of India should say to a listening world that it was impossible for them to carry on their duties if His Majesty's Dominions were unable to protect the just rights of His Majesty's Indian subjects and, on this ground, resign from their offices."

What to expect from Putin's new term

President to redraw energy markets as oil, gas remain key sources of prosperity for Russia

KP NAYAR
STRATEGIC ANALYST

FOR a week now, since Vladimir Putin's re-election as Russia's President, the world has been divided — although not equally — in congratulating him or deriding his re-election. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was swift in messaging his "warm congratulations" and "looking forward to working together... in the years to come." Two days later, as soon as a phone call could be scheduled, Modi had an extended conversation with Putin.

Equally swiftly, European Union foreign ministers said the Russian presidential election was a fraud — just as Western countries prematurely wrote Putin's political obituary in June 2023 after segments of the Wagner militia organisation revolted against the Russian army's hierarchy! Or like two years ago when the US, in particular, fantasised that Russia would be crippled by its illegal sanctions, which do not have United Nations' approval.

The normally cautious and reticent Kremlin Press Office has made an intriguing announcement that Modi-Putin "meetings will take place in the first half of this year, we hope, in a multilateral format, and there will also be bilateral talks on the margins." Realising that he had revealed too much, and, perhaps, out of turn, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov hastened to tamp down speculation about a Modi visit soon after the new government is formed in India. "This has yet to be agreed through diplomatic channels," Peskov added as a rider. Clearly wishing to understate his own curious statement, the spokesperson



SPLIT WIDE OPEN: Vladimir Putin's re-election as Russian President has evoked a mixed reaction. REUTERS

added: "Of course, the Prime Minister of India has an open invitation to visit our country."

The next summit of the plurilateral BRICS group, hosted by Russia, is not scheduled to take place in Kazan until October when the Tatarstan capital will have its most salubrious weather. So, clearly, there is much that is going on behind the scenes. Adding to the intrigue is the sudden speculation that Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba will visit India this week. New Delhi's grapevine began buzzing about Kuleba's visit as soon as Modi put his phone down after a surprise call to Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday. If Kuleba's visit takes place, he will be the highest-ranking Ukrainian minister to travel to New Delhi since the conflict with Russia began. Ukraine's First Deputy Foreign Minister Emine Dzhaparova was in New Delhi last April, but she had clearly invited herself to India with help from her spiritual connections in this country, according to resourceful grapevine. Dzhaparova did not get much access to Raisina Hill, the seat of power in the national capital, during her visit.

To presume that Putin's new presidential term will maintain the status quo, merely because

For the sake of its energy security, India must choose where it fits into the scheme of things.

his victory was widely anticipated, is to misread Russian politics. Since oil and gas will continue to be the main sources of prosperity for Russia in the medium-term future, Putin's focus in his next six years as President will be to redraw its energy markets. He will no longer trust Europe to buy Russian oil and gas as it did before the Ukraine conflict — and Europe would not trust him. Turkey and China will be critical to these diversification efforts through gas hubs and pipelines while prioritising collaboration with the Gulf states, both in production stability and infrastructure-building for an Arctic energy

corridor. India, for its own energy security, must choose where it fits into this scheme of things. Modi and Putin have signed on to bright ideas previously — such as the Vladivostok-Chennai Eastern Maritime Corridor. But like many Indian projects, such as the decades-old, slow-paced Chabahar port project in Iran, the corridor has remained in limbo. The Vladivostok-Chennai link was conceived to bring coal, oil, liquefied natural gas, fertilisers and so on from the fabulously resource-rich Russian east, which is Asian, to meet India's growth needs.

Unlike in the US, there has been no discussion in Russia — even in private — about its ageing President. Donald Trump is 77, and Putin will be of the same age when his new six-year term in office ends. Joe Biden, too, was 77 when he moved into the White House. There is no obvious successor to Putin and all his trusted top aides are older than him, even if slightly. Putin is likely to induct next-generation leaders into his administration as his next term gets underway. He will only bring in new faces he implicitly trusts, in view of the pervasive culture of absolute loyalty in the Kremlin. Putin is said to be grooming his former bodyguard Alexei Dyu-

min — in his early 50s — who is gaining experience on the ground as an incumbent provincial Governor. Russia's notoriously inefficient state industrial sector needs modernisation. Russian media has reported that family friend Boris Kovalchuk — in his mid-40s — who has considerable experience in business and modern management techniques, has been tapped for induction into the new presidential team. There may be more such entrants.

Kremlinologists in Modi's team are not letting any grass grow under their feet. Just a day after Putin's re-election, India named a new Ambassador to Russia, Vinay Kumar, who has vast experience of Russian, East European and former Soviet republics' affairs. India did not wish to keep the Moscow post vacant after Ambassador Pavan Kapoor, another Moscow veteran, moved to the headquarters as a secretary. In a significant contrast, the Ambassador's post in Washington has been vacant for two months.

The Modi-Putin and Modi-Zelenskyy conversations have triggered speculation in domestic and international media about a peace offensive. Both Putin and Zelenskyy have outlined peace plans, but there is absolutely no meeting ground between those divergent offers. Besides, the US and the EU are unlikely to let such plans make any headway. The West still seems to be under the illusion that Russia can be defeated on the ground. But it lacks both the commitment and the resources to make such plans work. Meanwhile, Yulia Navalnaya, widow of the late Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, continues to be a puzzle. Like the hundreds of prominent dissidents in the Soviet era, Navalnaya, who has a personality much more charismatic than her late husband, appears to have decided to fight her battles against Putin outside Russia, on welcoming foreign soil, mostly Western. It appears to be an enterprise that is doomed from the start.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

If the Opposition disarms, well and good. If it refuses to disarm, we shall disarm it ourselves. — Joseph Stalin

A jilted lover and a hostage crisis

SATISH KUMAR SHARMA

JILTED lovers can be dangerous. They can harm or even kill the person they love. During my career in the police, I was very careful in handling such cases.

In 2010, I was a Joint Commissioner of Police in Ahmedabad. One day, I was sitting with the Commissioner of Police (CP) when information came that a dagger-wielding intruder had taken a middle-aged woman hostage in her house. He demanded that the CP should come there and listen to him. On my request, the boss let me handle the situation.

When I arrived at the spot, a crowd had gathered outside the ground-floor house. Before entering it, I asked an officer to call an ambulance in case anything went wrong. I went inside and found that in an about 12'x12' bedroom, a bearded young man was sitting on the bed. He had the woman in a chokehold and was brandishing a big knife.

On seeing me, he shouted: 'Stay out! Who are you?' I introduced myself. He said: 'You stay there but send everyone else out!' I did the needful and told him from the door: 'I am unarmed. You need not be afraid of me. I have come to listen to you. Just don't harm the woman. Give me the knife!' He did not give it, but lowered his hand and started talking.

The man said that he and the woman's daughter studied at a college in Indore. He fell in love with her, but she made a false complaint of harassment against him to the police, who lodged a case and arrested him. On being released on bail, he had come to confront her. On not finding the girl at home, he had made her mother a hostage.

I realised that he was desperate. He said he wanted the girl to give it in writing that her report was false. He wanted me to send it to the Madhya Pradesh Police so that they could drop the case against him. I told him that the girl was not in the city and any statement made under duress was not admissible in a court; still, I assured him that if he let the woman go, we could talk to the MP cops to resolve the matter.

He looked uncertain. I kept talking to him and told him that the woman was innocent and if he harmed her, things would become more complicated. In half an hour, he realised that his action was rash. He handed me the knife and let her go. We registered a case and arrested him. I counselled him to try to forget the girl and focus on his studies. I assured him that if his conduct was good, we could try to persuade the girl to not proceed further against him.

He was released on bail some days later. Before leaving for Indore, he asked me: 'Sir, why is the MP Police not like the Gujarat Police?' I said nothing. He then asked: 'Where are you from, sir?' Pat came my reply: 'MP. That's where I got selected in the police service.'

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Kejriwal conundrum

Refer to 'The devil is in the timing of ED action' (*Nous Indica*); the writer is right to note that the timing of AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal's arrest is questionable. But in all fairness, he was given ample time and several summonses by the Enforcement Directorate, but he remained evasive. Around a year ago, his former deputy, Manish Sisodia, was arrested by the ED in this case. If Sisodia was wrongly arrested by the agency, why has he not got bail yet? The ED should expedite its investigation into the matter. The fact that Kejriwal plans to continue as the CM and run the government from jail is ridiculous. There is no doubt that, as the chief minister of Delhi, Kejriwal has transformed government schools and improved healthcare facilities. But offering freebies to garner votes is a sign of bad governance.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Making a martyr of the CM

Apropos of 'The devil is in the timing of ED action' (*Nous Indica*); the arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal will make a martyr out of him. The alleged targeting of Opposition leaders by the Centre can backfire as it can evoke sympathy for the politicians being victimised and coalesce a divided Opposition into a united bloc amid the threat of a crackdown by government agencies. PM Narendra Modi must understand that there can be no free and fair elections if his key political rivals are behind bars or the accounts of the principal Opposition party, the Congress, are frozen. The misuse of Central agencies raises questions about the BJP's ability to win the elections for the third consecutive time.

CAPT AMAR JEET (RETD), KHARAR

Onus on ED to prove charges

With reference to 'Kejriwal's arrest'; once a champion of the anti-corruption movement, Arvind Kejriwal has now come to be known as a chief minister who got arrested in a money laundering case. But however serious and solid the case may be, the timing of his arrest is doubtful. It seems like the ED action was politically motivated. Going by Kejriwal's non-compliance with repeated summonses issued to him by the ED in the recent past, it is clear that the Delhi CM is trying to get mileage out of being under the scanner

of the probe agency. The real issue should not get lost in the heat of politics. The onus is on the ED to prove the case against Kejriwal.

DVG SANKARA RAO, VIZIANAGARAM (AP)

Beleaguered Congress

Apropos of 'Congress crippled'; it is a matter of great pity that the Congress, which has ruled the country for decades, is facing many challenges. Its electoral performance has declined considerably in recent years. And now, just ahead of the General Election, its accounts have reportedly been frozen. It is obviously hitting the grand old party hard. A party cannot fight an election without sufficient money at its disposal. It remains to be seen how things will pan out between the ruling BJP and the Congress in the Lok Sabha elections.

SUBHASH C TANEJA, GURUGRAM

The cost of human suffering

Refer to the news report 'Russia, China veto US bid in UN for immediate Gaza truce'; the veto by Moscow and Beijing on the US-led UN resolution for a Gaza ceasefire is more than just a diplomatic setback. It is a failure of epic proportions. With innocent lives hanging in the balance, the veto shows a callous disregard for human suffering. As the international community clamours for peace, Russia and China hide behind political manoeuvres, ignoring the urgent need for a truce. Their actions speak volumes about their priorities — giving importance to their own interests over the humanitarian crisis. It is time for true leadership to emerge, one that prioritises humanity over politics.

AMANJOT KAUR, MOHALI

Tap AI for safer commute

Apropos of the middle 'Artificial intelligence is the road to take'; the writer has rightly highlighted the plight of commuters in this country. Roads everywhere are riddled with potholes. Reckless driving is also common these days. Potholes and many commuters' blatant disregard for traffic rules often lead to road accidents. Since AI-powered algorithms can predict accidents, optimise traffic flow and facilitate efficient rerouting, the government must use the power of AI to ensure a safer and smoother commute for all in the country.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA

Make couples aware of risks involved in IVF



SHAILAJA CHANDRA
EX-SECRETARY, HEALTH MINISTRY,
AND FORMER CHIEF SECY, DELHI

WHEN Punjabi singer Sidhu Moosewala was gunned down about two years ago, who would have thought that his mother would go on to have a baby, and that too at the age of 58? The surprise development has raised a host of questions about the safety of everything surrounding the in vitro fertilisation (IVF) procedure, which is used to help a woman get pregnant. During IVF, the ovaries are stimulated to produce multiple eggs, which are removed and fertilised with the man's sperm to create embryos in a laboratory setting. The embryo is later transferred back into the uterus, where it is expected to develop, grow and result in childbirth.

Newspaper reports say that Moosewala's parents had gone abroad for IVF treatment, while the baby was delivered at a hospital in Bathinda. Regardless of the claims or the alleged harassment faced by the family, the regulation of IVF in general and its use on older women in particular remain pivotal for needy parents.

While the procedure has given hope and brought joy to countless couples, questions about the safety of the mother and child, the rights of women versus family pressure to bear a child, the legal status of the embryo and the care of a child born to older women are being raised.

Under the Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) Regulation Act, 2021, the normal upper age limit to undergo the ART procedure is 50 years. The Department of Health Research of the Health Ministry has asked the Punjab Government to investigate the matter and report on the pregnancy, which Moosewala's mother underwent several years beyond the prescribed age limit.

The ART Act restricts the upper age of the woman to 50 years because several adverse risks are associated with age. Dr Shalini Singh, Director of the National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research at the Indian Council of Medical Research, talked to me about the increased risk of gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia and multiple births, among other risks, that older women face. Hormones need to be pumped into the woman to stimulate conception, and it could have adverse fallouts, the extent of which may not be fully explained to or understood by the couples. The possibility of preterm deliv-



CAUTION: There is a need to strike a balance between a woman's desire to become a mother and the potential medical problems she might face during pregnancy. ISTOCK

eries, stillbirths and multiple births increases, which is why a comprehensive health check-up is essential even when IVF is sought to be undertaken in much younger women.

Apart from age, there is also the question of clinical capability at the IVF facility. The 2021 Act lays down a slew of regulations with regard to registration with a national registry and freezing of gametes and embryos that clinics and assisted reproductive technology banks must adhere to. A national board is expected to lay down the code of conduct to be observed by persons working at fertility clinics and set the minimum standards of physical infrastructure, laborato-

India has come a long way by introducing and regulating infertility clinics as well as the whole process of donation and conception.

ry and diagnostic equipment and the engagement of expert manpower. The state boards have a responsibility to follow the policies and plans prescribed by the national board.

Sperm and egg donors must be registered and monitored by the banks, which are required to keep accurate and current records of all donors. The regulations also provide for a grievance cell, adhere to embargoes on genetic testing for sex determination or alteration of the genetic characteristics of the embryo, prescribe guidelines for cryopreservation and provide for insurance cover for unforeseen events.

India has one of the high-

est numbers of ART centres that perform numerous cycles across the country. Though it has come as a ray of hope for countless couples, numerous legal, ethical and social issues have complicated the picture. There is a need to balance the desire of a woman to become pregnant with the potential medical problems she might face. From a feminist point of view, socialists have highlighted that IVF technologies can further strengthen the prevalent patriarchal values, including the immense pressure on a woman to become a mother and produce a healthy baby.

The legal age limit of 50 years shows concern for the fact that as a woman grows older, her eggs also age, which increases the chances of genetic anomalies and miscarriage. That is the reason why some couples opt for donor eggs. Even so, the age limit of 50 years is not cast in stone because, under Section 21(g)(i) of the Act, exceptions are possible after a medical evaluation that certifies that the woman is fit to undergo the procedure. The question is: how does one obtain that certification? That process is not widely known and needs to be publicised.

India has come a long way by introducing and regulating infertility clinics as well as the whole process of donation and conception. It

speaks volumes about the technological prowess of the medical fraternity and the availability of regulations to administer the entire gamut of infertility treatment. What remains are concerns about the efficiency and reliability of law enforcement agencies in the states, where it is common knowledge that the capacity and willingness to enforce the law are irregular or even deficient. Only if the national registry and the board exercise tight control and do it without creating unnecessary hurdles can one hope for compliance, tempered with compassion.

The other important concern is the cost. While public sector hospitals that undertake IVF are reported to charge around Rs 50,000 for a procedure, private clinics are known to charge anything upward of Rs 5 lakh — it can double or triple, depending on the facility. It is difficult to regulate prices when there is a willingness to pay, but overt commercialisation must be reined in.

As hundreds of couples hope to have a child at long last, the onus is on governments to make them aware of the risks involved. Besides, there is a need to exhibit empathy and understanding when dealing with this sensitive area, and not just confine regulation to a narrow interpretation of a law that can gift a life!

China losing economic heft amid widespread trust deficit



YOGESH GUPTA
FORMER AMBASSADOR

IN an interview to Bloomberg Television on March 5, Sharmin Mossavar-Rahmani, chief investment officer of the Private Wealth Management Company at Goldman Sachs, advised investors not to invest in China's stock market despite the CSI 300 index hitting a five-year low in February. There were many uncertainties in China's policy direction, the recent security measures had worsened the global sentiment, and there were worries over its declining domestic demand and escalating geopolitical tensions, she explained. Though the stock market had improved after the regulators took steps to reduce selling and increase institutional purchases, there were doubts whether the measures would lift the economy. China claimed that its economy grew by 5.2 per cent in 2023, but many economists and China experts doubt this figure, given the ailing property sector, declining foreign investment, trade and low consumption expenditure.

The gloomy economic scene

in China is borne out by facts and figures. China's net FDI plummeted to \$33 billion in 2023, about one-tenth of \$344 billion in 2021, as per China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange. The American chip-related global investments in China plunged from 48 per cent in 2018 to 1 per cent in 2022, shifting to India, Singapore and Malaysia. A US company, Teradyne, which manufactures testing equipment for chip fabrication, and British company Graphcore, which makes chips for artificial intelligence, recently shifted out of China. Japanese automakers such as Mitsubishi Motors, Toyota and Honda have either closed or reduced their presence in China, even as Chinese companies have become more competitive.

The situation worsened after China's crackdown on foreign companies, including the arrest of business executives on the charges of commercial espionage, since May 2023.

The competitive manufacturing, efficient supply chains, streamlined logistics and increasing exports supported by the government have been the hallmarks of the Chinese economy. China has been responsible for 31 per cent of the global manufacturing (value-added). After years of rising trade with advanced economies, China's exports to the US and EU countries, which account for about 40 per cent of its total exports, declined by



STRATEGY: At the policy level, China desires self-sufficiency in critical technologies and food products while making other countries more reliant on it. REUTERS

more than 10 per cent in 2023 due to the high tariffs imposed by the US, efforts to diversify purchases of certain items and declining economic growth in the EU. Last year, China's total exports declined for the first time after 2016 (compared to 2022) by 4.6 per cent to \$3.38 trillion. The saviour was China's exports to Russia, which surged by 46.9 per cent; otherwise, the decline would have been sharper. China is trying to find new markets in the developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Besides trade and investment, expatriates from the West and other regions stationed in China are also decreasing. China gave 7.11,000 residence permits to foreigners in 2023, down by 15

Global interest in visiting, understanding and doing business with China has waned of late.

per cent from 2019, as per its National Immigration Administration. The US State Department has kept China on its 'reconsider travel' list since March 2023, citing the risk of "detention and arbitrary enforcement of local laws". The number of passport renewals, as per the US Embassy in Beijing, has sharply reduced from the pre-pandemic level. The number of British nationals in China has declined by about 50 per cent from 2019 to about 16,000, as per the British Chamber of Commerce in China. The number of the Japanese has reduced by about 13 per cent and South Koreans by around 30 per cent from 2019, as per official figures.

Similarly, foreign tourist arrivals in 2023 were down by

about 60 per cent from the pre-Covid level. As per a Chinese analyst, major airports in the country are 'eerily empty', with international flights bringing few foreigners due to China's increasing quarrels with the US and other countries, reports of arbitrary arrests and detention, its obsession with security and China's support for Russia in the Ukraine war.

Foreign students in China returned to their home countries after the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. Most of them are yet to return, deterred by the geopolitical tensions, reports of a decline in the Chinese economy, high unemployment, low prospects of getting a decent job and China's new counter-espionage law, which has made it difficult to do research work. Many keen on learning Chinese are instead going to Taiwan. The number of American students in China declined from about 15,000 in the 2011-12 academic year to about 350 in 2022, as per the US Embassy in Beijing. According to the Chinese Ministry of Higher Education, the number of foreign students freshly enrolled in higher education institutions dropped from 1,72,571 in 2019 to 1,14,112 in 2022.

As remedial action, China has pledged to improve the participation of private companies in major national projects, to allow them to borrow more, expand consump-

tion of consumer goods and promote high-technology industries such as those involved in electric vehicles, batteries and solar energy projects. China has scrapped tourist visa requirements for 15 countries, including France and Germany, broken down market barriers for multinationals and eased restrictions on cross-border data flows. At the policy level, China desires self-sufficiency in critical technologies and food products, while making other countries more reliant on it. It wants to create new markets dependent on China, control supply chains and secure access to key resources for its industry, energy and food needs.

Not long ago, there was a lot of global interest in visiting, understanding and doing business with China. That has waned now as many countries, such as the US, UK, EU nations, Japan, India and the Philippines, consider China as a threat to the current world order as well as their security and are taking steps to reduce their dependence on her, establishing supply chains in their own or in friendly countries. While the complete exclusion of China from global supply chains is not possible, given its vast involvement and ability to manufacture many items at lower prices, the diversification of supply chains is underway for many items, though at a slow pace.

QUICK CROSSWORD

1		2		3		4		5		6		7
8												
9												
11												
15												
19												
20												

ACROSS

- Conscience-stricken (7)
- Greek woodlands deity (5)
- Thievish (5-8)
- Resistance to attack (5)
- Give a just claim (7)
- To last (6)
- Trouble constantly (6)
- A light slightly sweet bread (7)
- Artistically planned furnishings (5)
- Vice versa (5,3,5)
- Faithful (5)
- Betrayer (7)

DOWN

- North African mountains (5)
- Imperious (4,3,6)
- Bullfighter (7)
- Silly nonsense (6)
- A view (5)
- Use profitably (4,2,7)
- Rectify (7)
- Involve in conflict (7)
- Small Pyrenean principality (7)
- Renounce former belief (6)
- Christmas song (5)
- Corollary (5)

SATURDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Smack, 8 Keep dark, 9 Inane, 10 Daylight, 11 Grate, 12 Bet, 16 Caruso, 17 Action, 18 Gig, 23 Donor, 24 Teamwork, 25 Minor, 26 Foul play, 27 Lying.

Down: 2 Montreal, 3 Contrue, 4 Senate, 5 Apply, 6 Gauge, 7 Skate, 12 Bog, 13 Tag, 14 Atrocity, 15 Go to town, 19 Inroad, 20 Stuff, 21 Gamut, 22 Swipe.

SU DO KU

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

V. EASY

FORECAST

SUNSET: MONDAY 18:36 HRS
SUNRISE: TUESDAY 06:20 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	15
New Delhi	32	16
Amritsar	31	18
Bathinda	32	16
Jalandhar	32	17
Ludhiana	32	13
Bhivani	33	18
Hisar	32	18
Sirsa	33	19
Dharamsala	21	09
Manali	16	12
Shimla	18	09
Srinagar	22	06
Jammu	30	15
Kargil	10	02
Leh	10	-02
Dehradun	32	15
Mussoorie	23	11

CALENDAR

MARCH 25, 2024, MONDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 5
- Chaitra Parvishite 12
- Hijari 1445
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 15, up to 12:30 pm
- Vidha Yoga up to 9:30 pm
- Utraphalguni Nakshatra up to 10:38 am
- Moon in Virgo sign
- Phalgun Purnima
- Holi