Stop the war

Israel must heed the UNSC resolution for a ceasefire

Five and half months after Israel's assault on Gaza began, in which 32,000 Palestinians have been killed, another 74,000 injured, more than 90% of the enclave's population displaced and nearly all of them pushed into a devastating hunger crisis, the UN Security Council (UNSC), on March 25, called for "an immediate ceasefire" and release of all hostages held by Hamas. The United States, which has vetoed every UN resolution earlier that called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, abstained this time, signalling a change in the Biden administration's policy towards the war. All other members of the UNSC, including Britain, which until recently had resisted calls to back a ceasefire, voted for the resolution. Israel responded angrily, cancelling a planned visit of two of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's close cabinet aides to Washington, and, backed by China and Russia, blasting the resolution, for not conditioning a ceasefire on the release of hostages. But beneath the anger and outburst lies Israel's weakness. Israeli leaders have repeatedly said in recent weeks that an invasion of Rafah, the southernmost town where some 1.4 million Palestinians have been cramped into, was in the offing. It would be highly inappropriate, after 14 members of the UNSC called for an immediate ceasefire, for Israel to launch an attack on Rafah, which could end up in another bloodbath.

The latest war was triggered by Hamas's October 7 cross-border attack where at least 1,200 Israelis were killed. Israel had the sympathies and solidarity of the world on that day. But what Israel did in subsequent months was to punish the entire population of Gaza for what Hamas did, which turned international public opinion against it. If Israel makes an objective assessment of the situation, it should immediately abide by the UNSC resolution and declare a ceasefire. The October 7 attack itself was a massive intelligence and security failure for which Mr. Netanyahu should take responsibility. Instead of doing that, he went to war with full force, without proper achievable targets. After months-long fighting, Israel has turned much of Gaza into rubble, but has neither destroyed Hamas nor rescued hostages. The prolonged war has created fissures within the Netanyahu cabinet. The Prime Minister is immensely unpopular and his coalition partners are at war with one another. The war has also increased Israel's isolation, with tensions rising in its ties even with its close partners, including the U.S. If Israel continues the war with no clear end in sight, it will only worsen the domestic and international challenges it is facing, besides killing more Palestinians in the defenceless, battered, besieged, bombed-out Gaza. Mr. Netanyahu faces two choices. He can take the message from the UNSC seriously, stop the war, allow urgent humanitarian assistance into Gaza and continue talks with Hamas through international mediators for both the release of all hostages and the withdrawal of his troops from the enclave. Or, he can continue to lead his country in the dark in a state of permanent war.

Open season

BJP's push for alliance with BJD was an attempt to maximise gains

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), principal rivals in Odisha, nearly formed an alliance, and then pulled back to remain rivals. Even by the current standards of political morality, these moves were astonishing. The State unit of the BJP publicly opposed the move but the party appeared willing to give up 15 years of an anti-BJD campaign that gained it the status of the principal Opposition in Odisha. What could have been the mother of all opportunistic alliances was pursued with the goal of securing all 21 Lok Sabha seats in the State for the BJP, and BJD leader and State Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik continuing into yet another term in office without much of a contest. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid rich tribute to Mr. Patnaik's father, Biju Patnaik, on his 108th birth anniversary on March 5 and steered clear of attacking the State government. This was a reversal of the party's strategy until now. In 2019, the BJD had won 12 Lok Sabha seats and 43% votes while the BJP won eight seats and 39% votes. In the Assembly election that was held simultaneously, the BJP got 33% of the votes. The BJD and the BJP were allies until 2009, with the Congress as their main rival.

Mr. Patnaik is managing age-related constraints and trying to effect a transition to ensure that his political legacy continues. The BJP sees this as its best opportunity yet to win power. Parties that are dependent entirely on a single charismatic leader can face a crisis in their absence. Both parties could have achieved their immediate goals in the event of an alliance though it would have diminished them in the eyes of voters. In the general election in 2019, the Congress got only 13.4% votes in the State, a distant third behind the BJD and BJP. The party won Koraput and was runner-up in the Nabrangpur seat. This time, the party is hoping to cash in on the confusion created by the failed talks between the BJD and BJP. Along with former Congress President Rahul Gandhi's push for a caste census, it is hoping to draw dividends in a State where 50% of the population is from the backward community. Over the years, the party's organisation has weakened and the journey from rhetoric to reality could be a tough one. The alliance that did not happen shows that it is open season in Odisha.

A cry for help, a call for reflection and action



Sumant Kumar

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The current socio-academic climate in India raises significant concerns in the context of the nurturing of students. The transformation of socio-economic dynamics is not only instilling a sense of despondency among youth but is also becoming a cause for stress in their academic endeavours. This often causes students to go into a spiral, manifesting itself tragically in a spate of suicides.

Take for example, reports of a note that a teenager from Bihar wrote before fading away in Kota, Rajasthan (the hub of tuition/coaching). The stress that the child was facing was evident in the reference to the 'Joint Entrance Examination' (JEE) that the child was preparing for. In 2023, there were reports of youngsters preparing for various competitive exams in Kota ending their lives. Based on police records, 15 students faded away in 2022; 18 in 2019 and 20 in 2018. There was negligible data during the COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020-21 when traditional coaching centres were either closed or operated virtually.

Coaching and student welfare in Kota

Every year, over 2,00,000 aspirants from every corner of India flock to Kota in pursuit of 'academic excellence', to prepare rigorously for 'coveted' entrance examinations such as the JEE and the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET), the gateways to engineering and medical education in India, respectively. Enrolling in its residential coaching institutes, they ensure that Kota's economy thrives – an impressive annual revenue of "approximately ₹10,000 crore" due to these educational pursuits.

While the children pursue their goals, the management of these institutes have taken several significant, yet sombre, measures. Hostels have now been equipped with 'anti-suicide features' that include devices fixed to ceiling fans to prevent children from harming themselves and iron grills across balconies and passage ways. However, it is difficult to maintain uniformity in the approximately 25,000 paying guest accommodations in Kota.

In another preventive measure, the local government has stopped all routine testing in coaching institutes for over two months as a temporary measure. Hostel staff are also being trained and prepared to deal with the welfare of their wards. In the push towards professional development there is specialised training in mess administration, psychological support, behavioural counselling and an emphasis on overall student welfare. The Kota police have pushed hostel wardens to become more proactive by endorsing campaigns such as "*darwaze pe dastak* (knock on door)," while kitchen workers and meal service providers have been encouraged to alert authorities immediately if they notice students missing their meals or leaving their food untouched.

> The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often causes many an Indian student to go into a spiral, with tragic outcomes

In 2022, according to data in the "Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India 2022" report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), over 13,044 Indian students ended their lives – 7.6% of the total suicide fatalities in that year. Another grim statistic was that the number of suicides (students) rose from 10,335 in 2019, to 12,526 in 2020, to 13,089 in 2021. As in NCRB data (2018), nearly 95,000 students faded away between 2007-18.

There is also another grim fact. Over half of India's populace, specifically 53.7%, is made up of individuals under the age of 25. However, a significant barrier to their entry into the labour force is widespread deficiency in essential skills. The last decade has seen a distressing rise in student suicides, which is also connected to a lack of viable job opportunities.

The education system

In contemporary India, the lack of (suitable) job opportunities, a limited number of seats in government institutions and the high fees charged in private institutions have all created a climate where there is intense competition. This is deeply troubling and an issue that requires urgent attention. The relentless strain of competition plays on the young student, which is made worse by the pressures imposed on the child by parents without understanding their child's wishes. While some are coerced, often relentlessly, into achieving the 'pinnacle' of academic excellence, others are urged to aspire for admission in a 'desired institution'. Many others face harsh criticism for failing to 'meet expectations'. When the weight of these demands proves unbearable, or their aspirations seem impossible to satisfy, some choose to escape all of this in a tragic way.

An All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report (2019-20), showed that only 21.4% of colleges are under governmental administration, with 78.6% under private entities (as reported by the Union Education Ministry). A study in 2008 in *The Lancet* revealed that nearly 61% of global suicide fatalities were concentrated in Asia. Numerous families in India (especially in the middle and lower-income brackets), face financial constraints that prevent them from providing their children with supplementary educational resources such as coaching and tuition. This lack of support in turn places immense and intense pressure on students to succeed in examinations of various kinds. A lack of success then leads to tragedy. Additionally, there are numerous instances of faculty members in institutions often chastising students for their subpar academic performance, when they should be offering encouragement and assistance instead.

Society and family expectations

In contemporary Indian society, there is a noticeable shift in family structures with a weakening of crucial connections between children and their families. This in turn impacts a child's ability to engage with their relatives. Various factors influence a child's development within the Indian context, in turn affecting social relationships. The lack of establishing strong bonds between parents and children becomes clear when parents impose their academic preferences on their child. Parental control, emotional detachment, and societal expectations contribute to the sidelining of a student's individual interests. As a result, students grapple with the hurdle of meeting parental standards, especially when they have no innate interest in the subject or course forced upon them. A feature in Indian society is the emphasis on expectations, performance, and personal interests in family interactions. These dynamics can either propel students forward through positive reinforcement or negatively affect them due to socio-economic circumstances.

The inability to satisfy parental expectations can leave young individuals feeling humiliated, dejected, desperate, and harassed. It is crucial to create an atmosphere of empathy and acceptance to cancel out any potential negative consequences for our younger generation.

The unyielding quest for scholastic distinction often overshadows the social facets of a student's existence, driving them to sacrifice interpersonal bonds and pursuits that are essential for a well-rounded persona. It is disconcerting to find young students voicing their inner turmoil on social media, signalling distress. Educational purveyors themselves fail to provide the requisite emotional scaffolding that these young minds require. Moreover, pupils from socioeconomically underserved communities are confronted with the stark actualities of endemic discrimination, thereby intensifying their hardships.

So, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need for our social infrastructure to grow more supportive and accommodative and support these young lives.

Those in distress are encouraged to seek professional help, visit counsellors or call helplines

Set the wheels in motion for a cyclists' manifesto



Rahul Goel

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Cycling in India should not just be considered as another transport issue. Contemporary western discourse on cycling is often framed within the context of decarbonising transport, and rightly so. In India, however, cycling is a matter of social justice with a transformative impact on people's lives.

Data on cycling ownership and use

Against the tide of a relentless growth of car-centric road infrastructure and an incessant increase in the ownership of motor vehicles, cycling in India has remained surprisingly resilient. Consider the household ownership of cycles over the two decades, from 1998-99 to 2019-21, using data from rounds two and five of the National Family Health Surveys, respectively. While, nationally, ownership increased only marginally, from 48% to 55%, in some States, however, the growth has been phenomenal. In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, for example, the increase was from 30% to more than 75%, while in Uttar Pradesh, it was from 26% to 71%, and in West Bengal, from 53% to 79%. In comparison, population-weighted average car ownership across these four States was a measly 5.4% in 2021.

Data suggests that this increase in ownership of cycles also translates to higher use. In a working paper, a team at the Transportation Research and Injury Prevention Centre at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi analysed the data from the three rounds of National Sample Survey Organisation surveys on household consumption on education (2007-17). Among the many indicators, this data reported how children go to school – walking, by cycle, bus, or other. We independently collected data on the implementation of bicycle distribution schemes (BDS), using Right to Information applications, when necessary. Under these schemes, different State governments provide free bicycles to children using either in-kind or in-cash transfers.

> Political parties in India should focus on cycling, which in India is not another transport issue but a matter of social justice and transformation

Nationally, cycling to school increased from 6.6% in 2007 to 11.2% in 2017. In rural areas, the levels nearly doubled (6.3% to 12.3%) while, in urban areas, the levels have remained stable (7.8% to 8.3%).

We found that the States that saw the greatest decadal increase in cycling to school were those where BDS had been implemented. In Bihar, for example, BDS was launched in 2006, and the level of cycling to schools quadrupled from 3.6% in 2007 to 14.2% in 2017. The Sabooj Saathi scheme in West Bengal started in 2015, and the levels there increased from 15.4% in 2014 to 27.6% in 2017– a 12 percentage point increase over three years. The success of BDS across various States in India is a testimony to the huge latent demand for cycling.

Social outcomes

Access to cycles can have a profound impact on children's lives. Under BDS in Bihar, the State government provided funds to girls who enrolled in class nine to buy bicycles. Evaluations from Bihar and Karnataka suggest that the BDS is associated with the enrolment of girls in class nine and girls appearing for secondary school certification exams. Most importantly, these outcomes indicate that some children did not go to schools, or went there infrequently, as the schools were too far to walk to, and they could not afford a bicycle.

We recently evaluated the impact of a small-scale experiment in Bengaluru where a non-governmental organisation provided free bicycles to 170 low-income women working in garment factories. We found that two-thirds of those who were given a bicycle, along with some training, switched to cycling to go to work. Earlier, they either walked long distances or took a bus. When we asked why they had not considered buying a bicycle before, almost half responded that they could not afford it.

For many, owning a cycle remains a luxury. It is for a similar reason that there was a jump, by 23%, in daily bus ridership after Karnataka implemented the Shakti scheme, which provides free bus travel to women. Out-of-pocket expenses can be a major barrier to transport use.

More State governments should consider implementing BDS schemes, and these should be broadened in their coverage (for example, remove the restriction to rural areas, and extend them to urban areas). There are rare cases of States that have schemes for adults, such as Uttar Pradesh, that provide free bicycles to labourers. These should be considered for large-scale implementation.

Cyclists and urban challenges

In urban areas, though, the provision of cycles will not be enough. Roads are designed in ways that make cycling an experience full of hazards. Multi-lane roads, flyovers, and wide junctions make it extremely risky for cyclists to navigate through the traffic without inviting risks. According to an estimate this writer did for Delhi, for the same distance travelled, a cyclist is 40 times more likely to be involved in a traffic fatality than a car occupant. Cities should invest in dedicated cycling infrastructure such as cycle tracks, safe and secure parking, and repair shops.

In the parliamentary elections, political parties in India have the opportunity to promise a cyclists' manifesto.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ceasefire call

With the United Nations Security Council passing the resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza during Ramzan, one hopes for an end to the bloodshed and for greater sense to prevail (Page 1, March 26). Though the war began as retaliation for Hamas' attack, innocent children and women have fallen victim to Israel's deep anger. It is not clear how far Israel can succeed with this track against Hamas.

With the blocking of essential food items, it seems that Tel Aviv has adopted famine creation as a war strategy. Israel's reaction to the UN resolution is not encouraging.

J. Radhakrishna Kurup,
Ettumanoor, Kottayam, Kerala

Though silent on the culpability of Hamas for the dastardly attack on Israel on October 7, triggering immense suffering for Palestinians, the ceasefire demand must nonetheless be welcomed.

A suspension of hostilities would indubitably bring respite for millions of civilians reeling from the deadly war. However, it remains to be seen if the resolution would be honoured by the Jewish state, given its established track record of dismissing with impunity the UN resolutions against it. One can only hope against hope that a yearning for vengeance becomes subdued and the love for humanity prevails in its place.

Michael Jom,
Thiruvananthapuram

A discordant note

The late violin maestro, Kunnaikudi Vaidyanathan, was a regular invitee to the Ram Seva Mandali concerts in Bengaluru during Ramanavami celebrations. He was invited despite his playing film tunes, by request. Few cared to raise objections. He was adored by Carnatic music lovers of all age groups. The controversy that has enveloped musician T.M. Krishna is unfortunate.

In his enthusiasm to propagate Carnatic music he may have annoyed some purists and grazed against some time-honoured boundaries, but the public spat and consequent polarisation now among musicians and music lovers is most unfortunate (Editorial page, March 26). It reveals the petty-mindedness entrenched in some important musicians.

Mohan Das,
Bengaluru

As a reader of *The Hindu* for the past 75 years, to find that the daily has focused on a controversial Carnatic musician who has been steadfast in propagating anti-Brahminical views is baffling.

One cannot ignore the foundations of the structure of Carnatic music which has been built, step by step, by great composers of yore.

Sanakaranarayanan R.,
Chennai

The Carnatic music fraternity is a mature and friendly group. *Rasikas* are also well-informed and understand nuances. In the conferment of any award or title there is bound to be some disgruntlement. I am sure that tempers will calm and we will be back to having packed concert halls, with Mr. Krishna and the popular singer sisters spreading harmony and joy.

L. Rangarajan,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

The democratic political process is broken



Ruchi Gupta

is Executive Director of the Future of India Foundation. X: guptar

The democratic political process in India is broken. It is not just that the institutional machinery has been captured, but that it is becoming impossible to alter the balance of power on any issue to chart a new way forward. At its heart, the democratic political process is not about regime change or "resistance". The purpose of democratic politics is to facilitate constructive collaboration, of which capturing power and regime change is one part. Seen thus, democratic politics is about building consensus in favour of certain paths and providing platforms for collective action. But all traditional sites of consensus-building – public discourse, civil society, and political parties – have evolved to structurally impede dialectical cooperation.

This is different from the issue of institutional capture because institutions of the state are downstream of the political process. Such institutions can neither be in the business of facilitating collectives nor mooting alternatives; they instead derive their credibility from procedural integrity. What is at stake here is more fundamental to our polity and speaks to our inability to collaborate. Consequently, even on issues which have deep public resonance, we as a polity are unable to move beyond outrage, protest, or resignation. It is crucial to identify the pathologies affecting each of these sites if we are to restore the democratic potential of our political process.

The nature of discourse

In a democracy, public discourse provides the space for the back and forth necessary to evolve consensus. However, three connected developments have rendered our public discourse unable to facilitate this. First, many institutional news media have lost credibility due to which they are unable to establish a baseline of facts or exercise narrative control. Second, the rise of social media has decentralised the manufacture and propagation of content making virality instead of substance the primary determinant of value. As a result, engagement is prioritised over quality or veracity. Third, with the loss of credibility of many mainstream media, there has also been a rise in hyper-partisanship wherein people are no longer interested in dialogue or deliberation and news/content is primarily a tool to promote factional interests. Finally, the proliferation of media has led to the fragmentation of our collective attention while the steady stream of "content" has made all issues transient. In this backdrop, gaining visibility and capturing attention is more important than dialogue. Consequently, the public discourse has become a site for a million individual battles to capture attention and reinforce tribal affiliation.

Civil society plays a crucial role as the voice of conscience in any polity and is the natural site to moot alternatives. However, the locus of liberal civil society action has increasingly moved towards the state and its institutional intermediaries; civil society has become dependent on a permissive state to be able to function. In this model, civil society derives legitimacy from normative purity instead of drawing strength from its representativeness. It is thus suited more to single-issue campaigns than its ability to reconcile multiple viewpoints through negotiation. Civil society groups are also marked by the proclivity to bypass the political process in favour of institutional processes, such as judicial or bureaucratic interventions, to advance their agenda.

Finally, political parties have their own pathologies which shift focus to internal issues and reduce space for deliberation. Conceptually, one aspect of the role of the elected representative is to extrapolate constituency issues into a policy agenda. However, the average elected representative does not have the power and often even the inclination to do so, within the party setup. There is also uncertain electoral pay off from influencing the policy agenda versus directly intervening on behalf of the constituents for delivery of various services. Moreover, elections, even at the constituency level, involve a complex and variable mix of "representation" of constituency, State, and national issues. Consequently, all candidates except the local strongman derive a decisive fraction of votes from the party symbol. This tilts the balance of power heavily towards decision-makers for party tickets within the party. This is further compounded by the fact that institutional positions of power in any party are a fraction of the actual aspirants leading to a preoccupation with internal machinations and sycophancy.

Our ability to come together

These various pathologies feed off each other to fracture our ability to come together. The media may highlight issues but moving forward requires organisation by civil society and political parties. On the other hand, the dysfunction in our information ecosystem has powered the rise of unserious individuals to positions of influence. The top-down nature of parties has altered the structure of civil society by raising the bar for grassroots mobilisation to an untenable height, leading civil society groups to direct their energies into lobbying through intermediary institutions or becoming agents for the execution of bureaucratic projects. This has depleted the organisational strength of civil society and reduced its ability to intervene in the political process for correctives. The dialectical nature of these pathologies resists easy fixes but for the world's largest democracy, the complexity of the issue is not reason enough to not try.

All the traditional sites of consensus-building — public discourse, civil society, and political parties — have evolved to structurally impede dialectical cooperation

It's all in the family

No party in Karnataka can take a moral high ground on dynastic politics

STATE OF PLAY

S. Bageshree
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There was barely even a murmur about nepotism or dynastic politics after the Congress announced its second list of candidates, teeming with sons, daughters, and relatives of incumbent ministers and senior leaders, for the Lok Sabha elections. This is not surprising, though: no party in Karnataka can claim moral superiority on this count.

While the Janata Dal (Secular) or JD(S) has always openly been a "family party", the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too has not been a "party with a difference" despite all its tall claims. At the core of multiple rebellions in the Karnataka unit of the BJP in the run up to Lok Sabha elections is the accusation that veteran leader B.S. Yediyurappa, his son and party president B.Y. Vijayendra, and their coterie have a stranglehold on the party and choice of candidates. There are also at least five contestants who hail from political families in the BJP's list. The top leaders of the BJP, who never tire of taking digs at the Congress on this count, and who used to be critical of the "father-son" JD(S) until the party allied with the regional party, have said little so far.

The Congress, after its leaders failed to convince incumbent ministers to contest, has ended up fielding the children of five Cabinet ministers in the second list of 17 candidates: Sowmya Reddy from Bengaluru South, Priyanka Jarkiholi from Chikkodi, Mrinal R. Hebbalkar from Belagavi, Samyukta Patil from Bagalkot, and Sagar Khandre from Bidar. Barring Ms. Reddy, all of them

are in the electoral fray for the first time and under 35. The party has also fielded Prabha Mallikarjun, the wife of an incumbent minister and daughter-in-law of a powerful party veteran. All-India Congress Committee president Mallikarjun Kharge has bequeathed Kalaburagi, the segment he won twice before losing in 2019, to his son-in-law Radhakrishna Doddamani. And the announcement of ticket for the Kolar seat is hanging fire over Minister K.H. Muniyappa's insistence that it be given to his son-in-law.

In the JD(S), as expected, two of the three seats that have come the party's way as part of the coalition arrangement with the BJP is being fought by members of H.D. Deve Gowda's clan. While H.D. Kumaraswamy is contesting from the high-profile seat of Mandya, his nephew and incumbent MP Prajwal Revanna is the candidate from Hassan. Mr. Kumaraswamy's brother-in-law, C.N. Manjunath, is also in the race from Bengaluru Rural, though on a BJP ticket.

The BJP has been facing rebellion in many constituencies, especially in the districts of north Karnataka, after announcing its candidates, but the loudest critics flagging the issue of "dynastic politics" are senior leaders K.S. Eshwarappa and D.V. Sadananda Gowda. Ironically, Mr. Eshwarappa is miffed that his son has been denied a ticket, apparently because Mr. Yediyurappa went back on his promise, and has vowed to fight as an independent candidate against his elder son B.Y. Raghavendra, from Shivamogga. Mr. Gowda, MP from Bengaluru North, has been denied a ticket and Mr. Yediyurappa's close confidante, Shobha Karandlaje, is contesting in his place.

Both leaders have been going out of their way to make it clear that their fight is not against Mr. Modi and that they are in fact trying to protect the core values he represents. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been fighting against the dynastic politics of the Congress, but here, the BJP is going the Congress way," Mr. Eshwarappa said. But it escapes no one that the BJP high command's decision to return the reins of the State party unit to Mr. Yediyurappa and his kin is a conscious one after its experiment of sidelining the senior leader failed. Mr. Yediyurappa may be the fall guy for now, but the buck stops with the national high command in the party hierarchy.

The Congress, meanwhile, has been talking about "winnability" as the reason for its choices, which has always been a euphemism for might and money. The party is not in an enviable position as its bank accounts have been frozen nationally by the Income Tax Department. This is being cited as one of the reasons to leave the local ministers and senior party leaders to their own devices; they are fielding their kin, funding them, and campaigning for them to ensure victory. Though there is no open rebellion against this trend, it bears no positive message for the party workers who don't have powerful fathers and grandfathers to back them.

It is time for comprehensive reforms to municipal elections

To deal with challenges with respect to the conduct of municipal elections, State Election Commissions need to play a far more significant role

DATA POINT

Srikanth Viswanathan

The Supreme Court judgment on the Chandigarh mayoral election gives us a good occasion to think more broadly about elections to municipalities. Elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are impressive democratic exercises in terms of timeliness of elections, the manner in which they are convened, and the clockwork nature in which power is transferred from one government to another. But elections to "first-mile" governments, i.e., panchayats and municipalities, is another matter altogether. The Court has only intervened to right one wrong in one city. A lot more remains to be done to strengthen first-mile governments in India.

The first issue with respect to municipal elections is that they are not being held on time. This is in violation of the Constitution. As per Janaagraha's Annual Survey of India's City-Systems 2023 study, over 1,400 municipalities did not have elected councils in place, as of September 2021 **(Table 1).**

The CAG's audit reports of 17 States on the implementation of the 74th Constitution Amendment Act (74th CAA) observes that over 1,500 municipalities did not have elected councils in place during the audit period of 2015-2021 across States **(Table 2).** Among larger cities, the Greater Chennai Corporation had elections in 2022 after a gap of nearly six years, and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi had elections after a delay of seven months, while the municipal corporations of Mumbai and Bengaluru are awaiting elections for over one and a half years and three years after the expiry of the term of their previous elected councils.

Second, where elections to urban local governments were held, in certain cases, councils were not constituted, and elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees were delayed. In Karnataka, there was a delay of 12-24 months in the formation of elected councils after the declaration of election results in most of the 11 city corporations. As per reports, in 214 urban local governments (out of 304) in Karnataka, there was a 26-month delay in the formation of councils and election of chairpersons and standing committees for the first 2.5-year term, after election results were announced in September 2018. Further, after the expiry of the first term of 2.5 years in May 2023, the same urban local governments did not hold elections for chairpersons and standing committees for more than eight months as of 2023. The delay in Chandigarh by comparison was 12 days. Summary data on constitution of councils, and elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees are not available easily.

The first challenge of holding timely elections requires determined enforcement with the Supreme Court's intervention. Article 243U of the 74th CAA stipulates that the duration of urban local governments is five years and that an election to constitute an urban local government should be completed "before the expiry of its duration". Further, in case of dissolution of the elected council by the State, the election should be held before the expiration of a period of six months from the date of its dissolution. Despite the Supreme Court stating in *Suresh Mahajan v. State of Madhya Pradesh* (2022) that this constitutional mandate is inviolable, State governments do not hold timely elections to urban local governments.

The second challenge is what the courts dealt with partially in the Chandigarh case. It appears to be an area that deserves greater policy attention in at least the following aspects: discretion of government officials in scheduling elections on time; possibility of the State government exercising undue influence on officials to delay elections; discretion of officials in identifying the presiding officer; possibility of conflict of interest as the presiding officer may not be independent; and the manual ballot paper-based process. A reform road map for timely, free, and fair elections is much-needed. The terms of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees being less than five years accentuates this challenge by necessitating frequent elections, sometimes even annually. In India, 17% of cities including five of the eight largest ones have mayoral terms less than five years. We need a standardisation of mayoral terms of five years.

To deal with these challenges, State Election Commissions (SECs) need to play a far more significant role. Articles 243K and 243ZA of the Constitution state that the superintendence, direction, and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and the conduct of, all elections to panchayats and urban local governments shall be vested in SECs. Our analysis of municipal legislation across 35 States and UTs reveals that while except Meghalaya, all States have constituted SECs, only 11 have empowered them to conduct ward delimitation. The Court has emphasised that in the domain of elections to panchayats and urban local governments under Part IX and Part IXA of the Constitution, SECs enjoy the same status as the Election Commission of India.

Perhaps it is time to also evaluate a potential role for the SECs in the elections of mayors, deputy mayors and standing committees, given what happened in Chandigarh. Unlike the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, where there is a clear distinction between the legislature and the executive, in the case of a municipality, the mayor heads both the elected and the administrative wings of the city government. Given the reluctance of State governments to strengthen SECs, perhaps it is only the Supreme Court that can bring greater salience to municipal elections.

Challenges to municipal elections

The data for the tables were sourced from Janaagraha's City Leaders report and CAG's audit reports

Table 1: Urban local governments without elected councils across States and UTs

Sl. No.	State/UT	Total ULGs	No. of ULGs without elected councils	Sl. No.	State/UT	Total ULGs	No. of ULGs without elected councils
1	A & N	1	1	19	M.P.	409	16
2	Andhra	120	31	20	Maharashtra	399	-
3	Arunachal	19	-	21	Manipur	27	27
4	Assam	102	102	22	Meghalaya	11	11
5	Bihar	249	-	23	Mizoram	23	-
6	Chandigarh	1	-	24	Nagaland	39	39
7	Chhattisgarh	169	20	25	Odisha	114	114
8	D & NH, D & D	3	-	26	Puducherry	5	5
9	Delhi	4	-	27	Punjab	163	-
10	Goa	14	8	28	Rajasthan	213	-
11	Gujarat	165	3	29	Sikkim	7	-
12	Haryana	92*	75	30	T.N.	664	664
13	Himachal	61	-	31	Telangana	142	-
14	J&K	78	-	32	Tripura	20	20
15	Jharkhand	50	8	33	U.P.	750	-
16	Karnataka	338	207	34	Uttarakhand	93	7
17	Kerala	93	-	35	W.B.	126	126
18	Ladakh	2	-	**Total**		**4,766**	**1,484**

Source: Janaagraha's City Leaders report based on the data available on the Local Self-Government Directory, urban local government websites, telephone calls made to government officials and journalists, and newspaper reports. Data as of 16 September 2021. | *Haryana: ULBs - LSG Directory says that there are 92 ULBs in the State, whereas, **https://haryanacmoffice.gov.in/urban-local-bodies-department** says 87 (updated on 15 November 2021).

Table 2: Urban local governments without elected councils as per the CAG's performance audit reports

Sl. No.	State	No. of ULGs without elected council
1	T.N.	664
2	M.P.	347
3	Karnataka	210
4	Punjab	129
5	Haryana	50
6	Manipur	27
7	Rajasthan	6
8	Jharkhand	15
9	Andhra	22
10	Odisha	112
11	Uttarakhand	4
Total		**1,586**

Srikanth Viswanathan is CEO, Janaagraha



The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation building in Mumbai

Source: CAG audit reports | The audit period for all the States is from 2015-2020 except Kerala, for which the updated position as on March 2021 was included. The audit covered 539 urban local governments.

FROM THE ARCHIVES
The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 27, 1974

Coal production to be stepped up

New Delhi, March 26: The Department of Mines of the Union Ministry of Steel and Mines has decided to step up the production of coal without paying too much attention to the day-to-day wagon availability.

The Department seems to feel that unless it goes ahead with the task of stepping up coal production, it will never be able to achieve the targeted 95 million tonnes during 1974-75. But it is not known what alternative plans the Ministry has worked out to ensure against accumulation of pithead stocks of coal resulting from any disruption in railway movement.

The Ministry has also decided to step up the programme of exploration for new coal deposits. The Coal Mines Authority has already drawn up a programme for bulk purchase, including imports, of standardised machinery and equipment. The Singareni Collieries will also draw up a similar list and co-ordinate its activities with the Authority.

The Ministry has also decided to introduce an incentive scheme for officers making outstanding suggestions for the improved working of the coal mines. The Department of Mines would also like to take the initiative and responsibility in respect of all schemes for the utilisation of coal for the production of synthetic petroleum products and gasification of coal which are now being discussed by the various Ministries. The Ministry of Steel and Mines is fixing quarterly and monthly targets of production for each colliery. The collieries with higher production potential will be identified immediately. It is proposed to introduce a seven-day four-shift work programme in the collieries on a selective basis. Workers' representatives in these collieries will be consulted before the schemes are introduced.

PTI reports: The Railways, and Steel and Mines Ministries are drawing up an emergency programme to ensure speedy movement of coal and steel through efficient use of available wagons.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 27, 1924

Plague in Lahore

Lahore, March 23: Plague has not subsided in Lahore. If anything it has increased and about 20 deaths out of about 30 new cases everyday are reported.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The stake Adani aquired in Odisha's Gopalpur port

95 in percentage. Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd announced the acquisition of Gopalpur Ports from the Shapoorji Pallonji Group and Orissa Stevedores Ltd at an equity value of ₹1,349 crore. PTI

The funds unutilised by Central Pollution Control Board

80 In percentage. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has spent only 20% of the environment protection charge and environmental compensation collected so far for mitigating air pollution in Delhi. PTI

India's current account deficit in October to December quarter

10.5 In $ billion. India's current account deficit declined to 1.2% of the GDP in the October-December quarter from $11.4 billion in the previous three months and $16.8 billion a year back. PTI

GST demand notice sent to Life Insurance Corporation of India

39.39 in ₹ lakh. The Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) said tax authorities have slapped a demand notice on it for the short payment of GST for 2017-18. PTI

The jump in shares of Trump's social media company

50 In percentage. Truth Social's shares jumped on the Nasdaq, boosting the value of Trump's large holdings in the company as well as the smaller stakes of fans. AP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The need to curb black carbon emissions

What is black carbon and why is it harmful for the environment? Which sector in India is the biggest contributor of black carbon? How has the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana helped in reducing the use of traditional cooking fuels?

EXPLAINER

Chandrakiran Lakshmisha
Kaushik Reddy

The story so far:

At the COP26 climate talks in Glasgow in November 2021, India pledged to achieve net-zero emissions by 2070, positioning itself as a frontrunner in the race to carbon neutrality. According to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, India had installed a renewable energy capacity of over 180 GW by 2023 and is expected to meet its target of 500 GW by 2030. While carbon dioxide mitigation strategies will yield benefits in the long term, they need to go hand-in-hand with efforts that provide short-term relief.

Why is black carbon relevant?

Black carbon is the dark, sooty material emitted alongside other pollutants when biomass and fossil fuels are not fully combusted. It contributes to global warming and poses severe risks. Studies have found a direct link between exposure to black carbon and a higher risk of heart disease, birth complications, and premature death. Most black carbon emissions in India arise from burning biomass, such as cow dung or straw, in traditional cookstoves.

According to a 2016 study, the residential sector contributes 47% of India's total black carbon emissions. Industries contribute a further 22%, diesel vehicles 17%, open burning 12%, and other sources 2%. Decarbonisation efforts in the industry and transport sectors in the past decade have yielded reductions in black carbon emissions, but the residential sector remains a challenge.

Has PMUY helped?

In May 2016, the Government of India said the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) would provide free liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) connections to households below the poverty line. The primary objective was to make clean cooking fuel available to rural and poor households and reduce their dependence on traditional cooking fuels. The PMUY has established infrastructure to go with LPG connections, including free gas stoves, deposits for LPG cylinders, and a distribution network. The programme has thus, been able to play a vital role in reducing black carbon emissions, as it offers a cleaner alternative to traditional fuel consumption. The programme has provided connections to over 10 crore households as of January 2024.



Clean cooking: Women make tea on an earthen stove in Hisar District, Haryana. FILE PHOTO

However, in 2022-2023, 25% of all PMUY beneficiaries – 2.69 crore people – availed either zero LPG refill or only one LPG refill, according to RTI data, meaning they still relied entirely on traditional biomass for cooking. *The Hindu* found in August 2023 that the average PMUY beneficiary household consumes only 3.5-4 LPG cylinders per year instead of the six or seven a regular non-PMUY household uses. This means up to half of all the energy needs of a PMUY beneficiary household are still met by traditional fuels, which have high black carbon emissions. A shortage of LPG and higher usage of traditional fuels also affect women and children disproportionately. They are more prone to higher levels of indoor air pollution, causing many health issues and leading to premature deaths.

What is the government's role?

The key to enhancing the quality of life in these areas lies primarily in securing access to clean cooking fuels. While the future holds the promise of meeting energy needs in rural areas through renewable sources, the immediate benefits for rural communities are poised to come from using LPG.

In October 2023, the government increased the LPG subsidy to ₹300 from ₹200. But with rapid increase in LPG prices over the last five years, the cost of a 14.2-kg LPG cylinder, even with an additional subsidy, is still about ₹600 per cylinder. Most PMUY beneficiaries find the price too high, more so since cow dung, firewood, etc. are 'free' alternatives. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a further price reduction of ₹100 in March 2024, but this subsidy is expected to be temporary. The government has estimated that about ₹12,000 crore will be spent on PMUY subsidies in 2024-2025, a figure that has continuously increased each year since the scheme's inception. While it is the rightful duty of the government to make clean fuel affordable through subsidies, the problem of low refill rates will persist if availability issues are not addressed.

Another big hurdle to the PMUY's success is the lack of last-mile connectivity in the LPG distribution network, resulting in remote rural areas depending mostly on biomass. One potential solution to this issue is the local production of coal-bed methane (CBM) gas by composting biomass. CBM is a much cleaner fuel with lower black-carbon emissions and investment. Panchayats can take the initiative to produce CBM gas locally at the village level, ensuring every rural household can access clean cooking fuel.

What about the global stage?

As India navigates its responsibilities on the global stage towards long-term decarbonisation, there is an urgent need to act. Prioritising black carbon reduction through initiatives such as the PMUY scheme can help India become a global leader in addressing regional health concerns and help meet its Sustainability Development Goal of providing affordable clean energy to everyone and contributing to global climate mitigation.

Recent estimates have indicated that mitigating residential emissions will avoid more than 6.1 lakh deaths per year from indoor exposure to air pollution.

The authors work at the Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy (CSTEP).

THE GIST

- Black carbon is the dark, sooty material emitted alongside other pollutants when biomass and fossil fuels are not fully combusted. It contributes to global warming and poses severe risks.
- Most black carbon emissions in India arise from burning biomass, such as cow dung or straw, in traditional cookstoves. According to a 2016 study, the residential sector contributes 47% of India's total black carbon emissions.
- The key to enhancing the quality of life in these areas lies primarily in securing access to clean cooking fuels.

Can AI help in navigating mental health?

How can natural language processing programmes offer personalised and immediate care? How can bias be mitigated in these chatbots? Do they help clinicians as well?

PULSE-CHECK

Iti Bhargava
Manmath Goel
Namrata Rao

The story so far:

We live in a world where therapy is a text away. Natural language processing (NLP), a branch of Artificial Intelligence (AI), enables computers to understand and interpret human language that mirrors human comprehension. In mental healthcare, we are already seeing a rapid evolution of use cases for AI with affordable access to therapy and better support for clinicians.

How does it help patients?

External and internalised stigma persists across demographics and countries. Through text-based platforms and virtual mental health assistants, NLP programs provide privacy and anonymity that can improve help-seeking behaviour. For users, the chatbot can support them in reframing thoughts, validating emotions and providing personalised care, especially in the absence of human support. Not only is this beneficial when a therapist is not accessible, but it also helps improve patient health outcomes just as well as in-person care. Mental health treatment requires continuity of care to take a more holistic approach and reduce instances of relapse. For example, digital therapy assistants can help point you to resources for healthier coping in instances of distress, grief, and anxiety. Since these chatbots are scalable, cost-effective, and available 24x7, they could therefore be integrated into existing health programs. Additionally, companies building chatbots must proactively expand the scope of service delivery through partnerships and collaborations for follow-up services such as referrals, in-person treatment, or hospital care, where needed.

How does it help clinicians?

Mental health illnesses have complex causes of origin, making it difficult to design a straightforward protocol or make a quick and accurate diagnosis. By using vast datasets, AI tools can help summarise information including clinical notes, patient conversations, neuroimages, and genetic information. This can help clinicians get up to speed with the entire patient history, saving valuable time during sessions.

Recent advancements in NLP programs have demonstrated the ability to forecast responses to antidepressants and antipsychotic drugs by analysing brain electrical activity, neuroimages, and clinical surveys. Such predictive capability can streamline treatment decisions and minimise the risk of ineffective interventions. Some chatbots are also creating e-triaging systems that can significantly reduce wait time and free up valuable clinical person-hours. With improving bandwidth, mental health providers can devote a higher proportion of time to severe mental illnesses, such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, where specialised care is required.

What's next?

There is immense potential and promise in these applications and we expect to see a growing adoption. Going forward, companies must refine these applications by using more diverse population-wide datasets to minimise bias. These programs can also incorporate a wider set of health indicators for a comprehensive patient care experience. We expect greater success of these programs if they are guided by a conceptual framework for improving health outcomes and rigorously and continuously tested.

In the pursuit of innovation, governments and institutions need to prioritise user safety and well-being by ensuring adherence to global compliance standards. As these applications evolve, we must persist in updating our beliefs, governing laws and regulations, and demanding better standards of care.

Iti Bhargava and Namrata Rao are researchers in mental health in India, and Manmath Goel is a healthcare investor.

THE GIST

- Natural language processing (NLP), a branch of Artificial Intelligence (AI), enables computers to understand and interpret human language that mirrors human comprehension.
- By using vast datasets, AI tools can help summarise information including clinical notes, patient conversations, neuroimages, and genetic information.
- There is immense potential and promise in these applications and we expect to see a growing adoption.

LOKNITI-CSDS

Is unemployment a major factor in shaping the vote choice of the youth?

In the debate over who bears responsibility in employment generation, the narrative swings like a pendulum between governmental bodies and individual citizens. This discourse not only reflects the complexities of economic challenges but also plays a role in shaping public opinion

Jyoti Mishra
Sanjay Kumar
Sandeep Shastri
Suhas Palshikar

For the upcoming Lok Sabha elections of 2024, Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have strategically crafted their narrative around four key pillars: the poor, the youth, women, and farmers, referring to them as the '*chaar jatiyan*' (four castes). This rhetoric is a departure from traditional caste politics in India, emphasising development and inclusivity under the pledge for a *Viksit Bharat* (Developed India). Among these, youth emerge as a critical focus. Prime Minister Modi's call to action in his 110th 'Mann ki Baat', urging first-time voters to participate through the 'Mera Pehla Vote - Desh Ke Liye' campaign, underscores the importance of the youth's engagement in the democratic process.

However, amidst these promises, a pertinent question arises: Does the BJP agenda truly resonate with the concerns of the youth, particularly regarding employment? Using data sourced from the Lokniti-CSDS survey, we attempt to unravel the pulse of the young electorate from Delhi. Conducted in the first week of March 2024, the survey involves interviews with 611 students in Delhi.

Existing employment realities

Existing realities reflect the struggles and aspirations of Indian youth to secure employment within a constrained job market. The youth themselves are aware of the limited employment opportunities in recent times. Data indicates that an overwhelming majority of youth in Delhi believe that it has become somewhat difficult (55%) or very difficult (25%) to secure employment in the last two years (Table 1). Despite claims of economic growth, the issue of job creation continues to be the biggest challenge. This uncertainty significantly impacts the opinion of the youth on their future job prospects. A considerable proportion of students express uncertainty about their employment prospects, particularly concerning their educational qualifications. While approximately a quarter (24%) express confidence in securing employment, a significant portion remains uncertain (Table 2). The youth aspire to secure stable jobs with security, exhibiting a prevalent preference for government jobs – with three in five (63%) aspiring for a government job.

The BJP initiated a narrative of transforming youth from job seekers to job creators within its vision for economic development. This idea promotes entrepreneurship, innovation, and self-reliance among the youth, aiming to shift their orientation from seeking employment to creating opportunities, not only for themselves but also for others. Interestingly, when youth in the survey were asked about this slogan, nearly half aligned themselves with the Prime Minister's vision of becoming job creators, suggesting resonance with the government's emphasis on entrepreneurship. Conversely, a little over one fourth (27%) stated they would seek employment. Nearly one in 10 also mentioned an inability to marshal resources to generate employment for themselves and others. This segment does not directly negate the overall idea of job creation (Table 3). Across gender, men exhibit a higher preference for this role, with nearly three in five young men (58%) expressing their willingness to become job creators compared to two in five (39%) women intending the same. Moreover, within various streams of study, the preference for becoming a job creator was higher among commerce students (54%), followed by science (48%). Students studying the arts (39%) were less likely to aspire for this role (Table 4).

Not enough jobs

In the realm of electoral decision-making among Delhi's youth, unemployment and inflation emerge as the important issues shaping voting preferences. Nearly four in five youngsters assert that the issues of unemployment and inflation would impact their voting decision

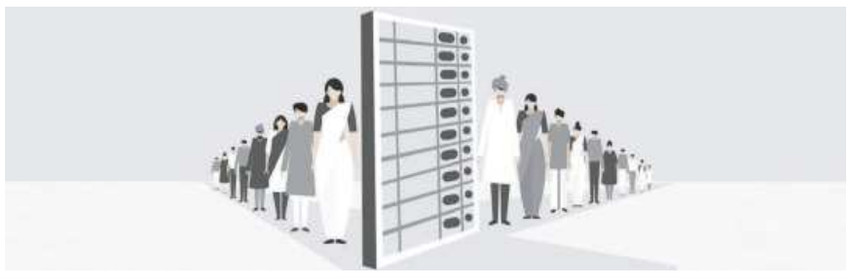


Table 1: Perceived ease of attaining employment over the past two years

In last two years, availing employment has become	%
Very difficult	25
Difficult	55
Easy	16
Very easy	3

Note: The rest did not respond.
Question asked: Compared to the last two years, is it easier or more difficult to get work or employment now?

Table 2: Surety about job prospects relative to education among Delhi's youth

How likely are you to get a job with the course you are doing?	%
A lot	24
Somewhat	49
Not much	16
Not at all	10

Note: The rest did not respond.
Question asked: What do you think, how likely are you to get a job with study you are doing –a lot, somewhat, not much, or not at all?

Table 3: Aligning with Prime Minister Modi's vision of becoming job creators

Job giver or job seeker?	%
Preferred to become a job giver	47
Preferred to become a job seeker	27
Lack of resources to become a job giver	12

Note: The rest either did not respond or gave other responses.
Question asked: The government says that don't be a job seeker but be a job giver, do you think that you can become a job giver to others in the times to come?

Table 4: Student perspectives on becoming job creators across diverse backgrounds

Gender	Preferred to become a job giver (%)
Women	39
Men	58
Stream of study	
Arts	39
Commerce	54
Science	48

Note: The rest studying other courses.
Question asked: The government says that don't be a job seeker but be a job giver, do you think that you can become a job giver to others in the times to come?

Table 5: Youth believe that the people themselves are responsible for unemployment

Who is responsible for increasing unemployment?	%
Narendra Modi-led Central government	30
Kejriwal's State government	14
The people themselves	35
Jobs are decreasing in every country	9

Note: The rest did not respond.
Question asked: *According to you who is responsible for increasing unemployment*

Table 6: How the youth are not disregarding the government's effort in generating employment

Assessment of Modi government in generating employment	%
Modi government completely failed	16
Modi government tried but couldn't succeed	55
Modi government has been completely successful	25

Note: The rest did not respond.
Question asked: Some people believe that the Modi government has completely failed in providing employment, but some people say that Modi government tried its best but could not succeed. What do you think?

Table 7: Unemployment, the most influential factor for youth's voting decision

	%
Unemployment	41
Inflation	23
Narendra Modi's leadership	12
Corruption	9
Ram Mandir	5
Your religious identity	2
Beneficiaries from government schemes	1

Note: All figures are in percent. The rest did not respond
Question asked: Which one of these issues will mostly influence your voting decision?

The BJP initiated a narrative of transforming youth from job seekers to job creators within its vision for economic development. This idea promotes entrepreneurship, innovation, and self-reliance among the youth

Who should generate employment?

In the ongoing debate over who bears the responsibility in employment generation, the narrative swings like a pendulum between governmental bodies and individual citizens.

This discourse not only reflects the complexities of economic challenges but also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. The attribution of responsibility to escalating unemployment rates is clearly visible among close to half the respondents. Three out of every 10 youngsters hold the Central government accountable, while one seventh point towards the State government for the squeeze in job opportunities.

Moreover, one third of the students attribute individual responsibility to the lack of employment opportunities (Table 5) and this perception is further nuanced by the belief in the efficacy of the Central government's efforts. While some acknowledge the endeavours made by the government in creating job opportunities, others assert that these efforts have fallen short of expectations. Interestingly, only one in every six (16%) admitted to a complete failure on the part of the Central government in providing adequate employment opportunities (Table 6).

Will issue of unemployment drive voter's choice?

In the realm of electoral decision-making among Delhi's youth, unemployment and inflation emerge as the important issues shaping voting preferences. Nearly four in five youngsters assert that the issues of unemployment and inflation would impact their voting decision. When asked to select the most important issue that would shape their vote choice, the issue of unemployment eclipses other important concerns, with nearly two-fifths of the students emphasising its significance. In contrast, inflation (23%), leadership under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (12%), corruption (9%), and other issues trail behind (Table 7). This data captures the centrality of economic concerns, especially unemployment, in shaping the electoral calculus of Delhi's youth.

In the lead-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has strategically positioned itself as the forerunner of development and inclusivity, particularly targeting the youth demographic. The data suggests that despite the BJP's emphasis on entrepreneurship and self-reliance, the youth's aspiration for stable government jobs persists, highlighting a desire for security amid economic uncertainties.

Furthermore, the attribution of responsibility for rising unemployment exposes the politicisation of economic issues, with divergent perceptions of the government's effectiveness in addressing this challenge.

Ultimately, the issue of unemployment emerges as a pivotal factor shaping the voting preferences of Delhi's youth, eclipsing other concerns such as inflation and leadership.

The writers are with the CSDS.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Fifth column (Sheela Paranjoti, New Delhi)."

" 'Fifth column' means 'a group working for an enemy within a country at war.' During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), when Gen. Franco's forces were marching towards Madrid in four columns, a fifth column of his supporters actively assisted him within Madrid itself. Any organisation or individual working within a country to assist the enemy is called a fifth column. 'Fifth column' is a translation of the Spanish 'quinta columna.' A fifth columnist is 'a member of a fifth column, a traitor or spy.' The Fifth Column is the title of a play written by Ernest Hemingway in 1937 about the Spanish Civil War. 'Quinary' means 'of the number five,' 'having five parts.' 'Quinquennial' means 'lasting five years,' 'recurring every five years.' 'Quinquennium' means 'a period of five years.' 'Quinquagenarian' is 'a person 50 to 59 years old.' 'Quintan' means (of fever and the like) 'occurring every fifth day'. 'Quintet' is any group of five. 'Quintuplet' means 'each of five children born at one birth.' 'Quintuplicate' means 'five-fold.' 'In quintuplicate' means 'in five identical copies.' 'Quintessence' is the most essential part of anything. 'Quintessence' means the fifth essence. In ancient and medieval Western philosophy, it was believed that besides the four elements, earth, air, fire and water, the fifth essence or element, ether, was the most important and was considered the constituent matter of the heavenly bodies.

The Gita is the quintessence of the Upanishads."

"Early, early on (Shanta Barua, Calcutta)."

"They do not mean the same. 'Early on' means 'soon after the start of a past event'. It refers 'to an early point or stage in a process or course of events.'

Early on in life, he realised every person has a price.

Early on, his father told him that he would be a successful painter.

Early on, he was an indifferent student. Later he became a diligent one.

'Early' means 'before the usual or appropriate time.'

He gets up early.

You cannot say 'He gets up early on.'

Early on in his student days, he used to get up early. Now he does not."

"Instantly, instantaneously (Subha Chatterjee, Darjeeling)."

" 'Instantly' means 'immediately, at once.'

When he heard the news, he left the place instantly.

I met him for the first time and liked him instantly.

'Instantaneously' means 'taking an imperceptibly short time to occur.'

When two events occur in such a way that the interval between them is imperceptible, you use 'instantaneous'.

The explosion occurred instantaneously when she touched the transistor radio.

There was an instantaneous applause when he arrived at the place of meeting.

These days only careful writers maintain the distinction between the two words."

Published in The Hindu on July 23, 1991.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Considered "the single most influential director of his generation", Quentin Tarantino was born on March 27 in 1963. Here is a quiz on his work

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1
One of his films paid homage to the sub-genre of blaxploitation films, making it the only feature-length film directed by Tarantino that was based on another work. Name the film.

QUESTION 2
One scene in the cult classic *Pulp Fiction* has prompted discussion of the film's highly intertextual style, regarding the dance sequence of John Travolta. However, Tarantino credits the scene to which famous filmmaker?

QUESTION 3
This film in the spaghetti western sub-genre won Tarantino his second Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. The story follows a slave who trains under a German bounty hunter with the ultimate goal of reuniting with his wife. Name the film.

QUESTION 4
What is the name of the 1987 amateur comedy film directed, edited, co-written, co-produced by and starring Tarantino? Some of the film's dialogues were used in another film. Name both films.

QUESTION 5
In June 2020, Tarantino became an officially recognised critic on which website, where his reviews are part of the rating?

QUESTION 6
In 2022, Tarantino stated that this film is "the greatest movie of all time. Maybe not the best film, but the best movie ever made". Which is it?

QUESTION 7
This is the 2021 debut novel by Tarantino, a novelisation of his 2019 film of the same name. What is it called?



Visual question:
Identify this Tarantino film. What genre do these films belong to?

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. The importance of PL Handoo's victory in the 1989 general elections in Anantnag. **Ans: Highest margin of victory in percentage terms (97.2%)**
2. The importance of K. Ramakrishna's victory in the 1989 elections from Anakapalle. **Ans: Lowest margin of victory in percentage terms (0.0014%)**
3. The constituency which had the highest number of electors. **Ans: Malkajgiri, Telangana**
4. The constituency with the lowest number of electors. **Ans: Lakshadweep**
5. This person holds the record for the highest victory margin in absolute number terms in Indian elections. **Ans: Pritam Munde, Bharatiya Janata Party**
Visual question: Identify this gentleman. **Ans: Sukumar Sen, India's first Chief Election Commissioner**
Early Birds: Rajmohan. V| Tamal Biswas| M. Suresh Kumar| Sadhan Kumar Panda

Word of the day

Genuflect:
bend the knees and bow in church or before a religious superior or image; bend the knees and bow in a servile manner

Synonyms: scrape, kowtow

Usage: *People usually genuflect in front of the altar.*

Pronunciation: bit.ly/genuflectpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈdʒɛn.jʊ.flɛkt/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to **letters@thehindu.co.in** with the subject 'Text & Context'

the hindu businessline.
WEDNESDAY - MARCH 27, 2024

Open the doors

A case for enhancing MF overseas investment limits

With mutual funds exhausting their $1 billion limit to invest in overseas Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs) this week, domestic investors can no longer diversify across the borders through the mutual fund route. The $7 billion limit that the Securities Exchange Board of India (SEBI) had set for Indian funds to invest in overseas stocks and bonds had run out in January 2022, pushing investors to explore ETFs in the past year. The mutual fund industry has been knocking at the regulators' doors to enhance its overseas investment limits. SEBI and Reserve Bank of India (RBI) must favourably consider these requests.



Today, there is a good case for regulators to open the doors wider to domestic investors seeking to diversify overseas. Current limits for mutual fund investments overseas were set way back in April 2008. Since then, there has been a significant improvement in India's foreign exchange reserve position as also its ability to fund its current account gap with capital flows. When these limits were set, India's foreign exchange reserves stood at about $300 billion, less than half of today's levels of $640 billion. Thanks to its ability to attract stable long-term Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in recent years, India was sitting pretty on about $528 billion in FDI capital by September 2023 (latest RBI data) compared to the FPI stock of $259 billion. In March 2008, the stock of FDI capital at $115 billion was below FPI capital at $119 billion. Remittances from India's diaspora have also risen steadily in recent years, from under $200 million in 2008 to over $120 billion in 2023, providing a substantial cushion to both forex reserves and the current account.

With the imminent inclusion of Indian government bonds in global benchmarks with effect from June this year, India has begun to attract substantial FPI debt flows along with its equity flows. The $6.6 billion of debt inflows so far this year have prompted RBI to intervene in currency markets to ward off upward volatility in the rupee. Rupee appreciation can undermine the headway India has made in services exports amid a cloudy global outlook for goods trade. In this backdrop, a calibrated opening of the doors to dollar outflows through regulated vehicles such as mutual funds to counter-balance inflows makes sense.

Policymakers should also recognise that, outflow of dollars towards investments in mutual funds cannot be equated with expenditure towards travel, tuition fees or maintenance of relatives, which make up the bulk of outflows under the Liberalised Remittance Scheme (LRS). While LRS outflows are a permanent flight of capital, investments create wealth for domestic investors. Mutual fund investments are also likely to be redeemed at a future date, with the capital returning. Allowing Indians to take the help of professional managers to own a basket of listed foreign securities through regulated vehicles, is preferable to their punting on risky crypto-currencies and offshore forex markets on their own.

POCKET: SUMMER OF '24 RAVIKANTH





RS SHARMA

Silent digital transformation of farmer collectives



E-COMM PUSH. ONDC is a crucial platform that brings together several FPOs to help sell their products

GETTY IMAGES

India has proven that digital inclusion can unlock unprecedented opportunities for value creation in the entire economy. This is made possible by the foundations of access to the internet and telecom and digital identity as Digital Public Infrastructure over the last decade, laying the groundwork for financial inclusion and market integration.

India's Digital Public Infrastructure is thus emerging as a critical factor of production and the latest addition in this family, Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) is expected to transform every domain of the economy by democratizing digital commercial transactions in products and services.

The fundamental principles of unbundling and interoperability in the ONDC's solution architecture enable innovators to build solutions and services that will empower large and small business enterprises to have equal opportunity to participate and compete in digital commerce on the merits of their products and services.

Government-backed Farmer Producer Organizations (FPO) have taken the lead in attempting to leverage this network.

As of date, around 5,000 FPOs — each representing approximately 500 farmer members — have been onboarded onto the ONDC Network making them visible to all consumer apps on ONDC across India.

The customer orders for products at prices fixed by the farmer with supporting services of logistics are available from the network at cost transparently visible to both consumers and sellers.

Thus, with the power moving to the end nodes, benefits are accrued closest to where the value is created or consumed (the farmer and consumers), and not intermediaries.

The FPOs that onboarded ONDC have started investing in local value addition.

Aryahi Fed Farmer Producer Co from Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, started with packaged honey, went on to make honey gift kits, and when these got a good response during Diwali, the FPO has invested in baked products using their honey, jam made with honey, bee wax candles, pollen, infused honey varieties and even pickles.

Digital inclusion is thus enabling market-led innovation providing a new avenue and definition of what D2C brands and companies of new India can look like, while also providing for village-level entrepreneurs and the younger generation to make the most of a New Digital Rural India.

PRODUCT DIVERSITY

FPOs on ONDC offer over 250 rice varieties, both raw and parboiled, some GI tagged too, each with its unique local folklore, taste, and aroma or over 50 varieties of pure honey from beekeeper FPO farmers, in a spectrum of colours, aroma and degree of sweetness.

It's a similar array of local products in all food sections — pulses, dry fruits, oils, beverages, fruits, vegetables, and even dry and fresh fish, opening the opportunity for these varieties to develop their brands and identities as Indian consumers experiment and try both traditional and modern recipes with diverse varieties.

Digital market integration of farmers collectives will have a multiplier effect on rural economies, unlocking opportunities for employment and income generation in India's villages. An early example of this is the New Agriverse Farmer Producer Co from Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. The FPO's primary crop is paddy.

However, the FPO is now growing a variety of mushrooms, from ordinary oyster mushrooms to exotic lion's mane

Digital market integration of farmers collectives will have a multiplier effect on rural economies, unlocking opportunities for employment and income generation in villages.

and selling them on the ONDC network. As more and more people are sampling the products online, the FPO has both expanded its offerings like mushroom noodles and dried mushrooms, and started receiving bulk orders for its products. Bringing FPOs to e-commerce is also a win-win for the network partners and the customers. Food and grocery are repeat orders. If the price, taste and quality click, there is customer stickiness and loyalty.

VIRTUOUS CYCLE

Thus, slowly each transaction creates capacity, skills and jobs for processing, packing and logistics, starting a virtuous cycle which enables closer integration of farm economies, towards the vision of a truly unified Indian market.

ONDC is thus bridging the digital divide to harness the unlimited potential of Indian entrepreneurship and innovation in every village.

While we may associate business strategies such as cross-selling and product sampling as being limited to large FMCG brands or e-commerce companies, India's Farmer Collectives are being empowered for products being sold online more than before, comparing ingredients of processed products, and offering competitive pricing.

And yet, these are still early pilots. As ONDC expands, there is an immense opportunity for optimising costs for farmers, such as enabling farmer collectives to buy farm inputs through the same network, be it seeds or renting agricultural implements.

At the same time, foundations are being laid for expanded financial inclusion for farmer collectives using verifiable digital transactions as the basis for credit and insurance, and building solutions such as crop planning, demand forecasting, and input advisory depending on soil topography, weather, etc. to become available for farmers in their own languages.

As Indian consumers rediscover the rich tapestry and variety of India's farm products with the growing momentum of Vocal for Local and Atmanirbhar Bharat, the ONDC network can make the farm-to-fork model a reality.

For consumers, this unlocks the opportunity to discover the rich variety of farm products, which, be it in terms of their price, purity, variety or traceability are unprecedented anywhere else.

As the initial pilots in assisted e-commerce through the ONDC network by both government-backed organisations like Citizen Service Centres (CSCs) as well as private sector enterprises and the recent announcement of Prasar Bharti's initiative to empower rural commerce through BharatNet are underway, there's growing excitement around digitalisation turning Indian farms and villages into growth engines for the entire economy.

This is an initiative that can achieve its objectives with every citizen in the country playing an active role.

The writer is a Member of Advisory Council of ONDC. Views expressed are personal

Gearing up for interest rate cuts in 2024

With rate cuts imminent, banks will have to recalibrate their risk management strategies

K Srinivasa Rao

In a synchronised move central banks in major economies had to raise policy rates to their peak levels during post-pandemic times to fight inflation.

Inflation is well on the way to reaching targets with front-loaded monetary policy tools working actively. Though upside risks to inflation cannot be completely ruled out due to geopolitical uncertainties, central banks have been maintaining a pause in interest rates for quite some time.

The US Federal Reserve in its recent FOMC meeting kept the policy rates at the existing level of 5.25-5.50 per cent which has been unchanged since July 2023.

It further affirmed its intention to implement a three-quarters of a percentage point rate cut this year though its inflation is still hovering around 3.2 per cent in February 2024 down from its peak level of 9.1 per cent recorded in June 2022.

The IMF in its January 2024 report expects the US economy to grow at 2.1 per cent in 2024 and 1.7 per cent in 2025. The US Fed's positive stance is already reflected in the buoyancy of stock markets and optimism set in financial markets.

Bank of England kept its policy rates intact at a 16-year high of 5.25 per cent since August 2023 to fight inflation, though it has hinted at cuts going forward. According to the IMF, the UK economy should be growing at 0.6 per cent in 2024 and at 1.6 per cent in 2025.

It is also noteworthy that the ECB kept the three key interest rates — 4.50 per cent (refinancing operations), 4.75 per cent (marginal lending facility), and 4 per cent (deposit facility) unchanged. Although most measures of underlying inflation have eased further, domestic price pressures remain high, in part owing to strong growth in wages.

The economy is expected to grow at 1.5 per cent in 2025 and 1.6 per cent in 2026, supported initially by consumption and later also by investment. ECB is thus well-positioned to reduce rates going forward.

The People's Bank of China (PBOC)



RESERVE BANK. Rate moves REUTERS

cut the reserve requirement ratio (cash that the banks are required to hold) by 50 basis points effective from February 5 to inject 1 trillion yuan to pump liquidity into the markets. The move can ease liquidity conditions and foster growth.

RBI'S PATH

Against the backdrop of robust GDP growth and inflation moving down to 5.09 per cent in February, it is expected that policy rates, at a standstill of 6.5 per cent since December 2022, will remain intact during the next Monetary Policy in April. RBI is committed to bringing down the inflation to 4 per cent mark on a durable basis. Logically, the direction of the monetary policy of RBI should be customised to domestic needs but it will be difficult to decouple itself from global winds.

Banks will have to face elevated interest rate risks at the beginning of the rate-cutting cycle as repo-linked loans will get repriced immediately while the term deposit costs will linger on for some time until their maturity.

In this phase, the industry, trade, commerce, and capital markets will be in a buoyant mood due to lower borrowing costs while banks will have to rework their risk management strategies to protect their net interest margins.

The demand for credit will rise while resource mobilisation will continue to be a daunting challenge. Risk-sharing strategies, augmenting alternate resources, and right pricing of liability products will have to work together for the impending soft landing.

The writer is an Adjunct Professor, at the Institute of Insurance and Risk Management, Hyderabad. Views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO EDITOR

Send your letters by email to bleditor@thehindu.co.in or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturi Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

EU's laudable move

The European Union's decision to order probe on tech giants such as Apple and Alphabet for their non compliance with digital market law is a laudable measure to protect other competitors and to ensure end users from being victims of business cartels.

Fair trade practices are critical to development as they will reduce unemployment and increase purchasing power of end users

Vikram Sundaramurthy
Chennai

Terror threat again

Apropos 'Moscow terror attack: How worried should we be?' (March 26), the deadly terror attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, underscores the concerns that IS, whose main bases in Syria and Iraq were dismantled six years ago, is on a path to revival.

Surprisingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin is not leaving any stone unturned to name Ukraine and NATO behind the attack although the four detained persons are Tajikistan nationals.

France has threatened to send troops to Ukraine and Putin may be hinting at a possible devastating phase in the war. Afghanistan is once again slipping into anarchy under the present Taliban regime, and with militants making inroads there, none of the countries including India are free from the terror threat.

Gregory Fernandes
Mumbai

Taxing times

This is with reference to the Editorial 'Tax tales' (March 26). Despite the 20 per cent hike in tax collections/tax compliance as on FY23, there has been no corresponding matching increase in tax base since decades.

It is to be noted that almost all Central governments so far focussed only on taxing the already 'tax paying citizens' with few rupees here and there as reliefs and ignoring other "haves" who comfortably are evading tax. The rich and powerful are happily escaping the tax net.

There is no point in just extending the numbers of coverage transactions linking PAN number to book only the existing tax payers. The Tax Department should also explore ways to detect other tax evaders and by hiring personnel under "marketing tax surveyors" category in every town/city etc to bring tax evaders into the tax bracket.

Given the way most of the businesses have recovered from Covid, it is surprising to see the lower growth in corporate tax collections unlike the robust collections in personal tax collections.

Katuru Durga Prasad Rao
Hyderabad

BJP's southern strategy

With reference to the Editorial 'Southern push', the BJP knows well that as far North India is concerned, it has almost reached a saturation point, while there is a huge scope of improvement in Southern States. Barring Karnataka, it has nothing much to show for. So it makes sense for the Prime Minister to woo voters from Tamil Nadu and other Southern states in a systematic way.

Tamil Nadu's BJP chief Annamalai's padyatra and interaction with voters is slowly gaining traction, but whether this will result in votes and in turn seats is a million dollar question.

The BJP knows that it can not take on strong regional parties in other Southern zStates on its own, hence it is better to ride on along with someone who already has a strong base there, TDP, JDS etc are good examples for that. 130 seats is 24 per cent of the total number of seats and it can never be taken lightly.

Bal Govind
Noida

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Maharashtra's textile push

Aims to be a global hub with a slew of measures

Chandrakant Patil



ROBUST. Development fabric

India's textile industry is one of the largest in the world — holding 4 per cent of the global market share — contributes 2 per cent to the country's GDP, and employs over 45 million people directly (making it the second largest employer in the country). The industry's production is projected to touch $250 billion in by 2030.

The textile industry has received much attention over the past five years, with numerous Central Government initiatives aimed at enhancing India's role as a global textile producer — basis the 5F vision of 'Farm to Fibre to Factory to Fashion to Foreign'. Through initiatives like the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme for textiles, Kasturi Cotton Bharat programme, National Technical Textiles Mission, SAMARTH, and PM Mega Integrated Textile Region and Apparel (PM MITRA) Parks Scheme, the textile industry has got a substantial facelift.

Drawing from India's ambitious endeavours to achieve $100 billion in exports by 2030, Maharashtra has emerged as a potent contender in driving the country's textile industry. Our contribution to the national textile industry is significant — accounting for 10.4 per cent of the total textile and apparel production and employing over 10 per cent of the total employment in India.

EXPEDITING GROWTH

The Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) has expedited the growth of the State's textile industry with the development of 11 exclusive textile parks, strategically located in areas like Amravati, Thane, Solapur, Kolhapur, Nagpur, Nashik, Pune, and Nandurbar (as of 2020).

Owing to the State's geographical position — with vast swathes of fertile soil under cotton (leading the national cotton acreage with 39.41 lakh ha) and an extensive coastline (a total of 50 ports) — we are preparing to establish a garment trading hub in Mumbai, giving it a competitive edge alongside China's Guangzhou and Turkey's Istanbul.

A robust focus on policies and interventions remains fundamental in strengthening our infrastructural capacities to facilitate Maharashtra's growth as a global textile hub. In recent times, the efforts in revolutionising the textile industry paved the way to the State becoming one of the seven recipients of the PM MITRA Park Scheme — to be established in Amravati — which is projected to attract ₹10,000 crore and create direct and indirect employment opportunities for nearly 3 lakh people.

The PM MITRA Park, which would be developed by MIDC and funded by the Central Government, aims to ease business operations for investors with the entire infrastructure to be established under the State government.

The State has further committed to developing 18 mini textile parks — aiming to attract ₹1,800 crore as investment and providing employment opportunities to 36,000 individuals.

Also, the recently released Integrated and Sustainable Textile Policy 2023-2028 manifests our stringent efforts in fostering robust conditions to attract investments, strengthen economic growth, and create significant/massive employment opportunities within the State. The policy aims to strengthen the State's textile value chain via technological upgradation and envisages to attract ₹25,000 crore in investment, increase cotton production by 80 per cent and create over 5 lakh job opportunities in the next five years.

Further, the development of six technical textile parks, enhancement of research and development to implement sustainable innovations, with additional emphasis on utilising information technology to promote ease of doing business, and augment skill development to ensure adequate skilled manpower in the industry, demonstrates our commitment to completely transform the State's textile sector.

The writer is Minister of Textiles, Government of Maharashtra

China looms over the high-seas

China's ships are ostensibly conducting research in the Indian Ocean. Their surveillance intent is all but apparent

THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARAN BALAKRISHNAN



NEED TO GEAR UP. Indian Navy is facing intense pressure from different directions ANI

A cat-and-mouse game is being played out in the seas around India. Four Chinese 'survey' ships are cruising in international waters off India's east and west coasts ahead of two planned missile tests. The latest arrival is the vessel known as "the floating laboratory": the Da Yang Hao, one of the Chinese fleet's newest, most sophisticated ships. Another boat, the Yuan Wang 03, entered the Indian Ocean a few days ago. It's no secret why it's there: Chinese state media calls it a missile-tracking vessel.

These ships' arrival sends a crystal-clear signal of how the Indian Ocean, which is a vital trade and strategic waterway for India and China, is fast becoming the scene of a high-seas power-play. For now, the India-China naval rivalry is playing out at a lower-key level with the Chinese keeping a careful eye on India's military moves. India tested its Agni-5 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) March 11. A second test slated for a few days later was delayed, possibly due to the Chinese ship Xiang Yang Hong 01 which has been cruising around the Bay of Bengal for several weeks.

Now, two new tests are about to take place. The first, on March 29-30, is around the Andaman Islands and stretches for about 400 km. The second, possibly of another ICBM, has been set for April 3-4 and covers a 1,600-km area from Abdul Kalam Island.

Meanwhile, a fourth Chinese 'survey' ship, the Xiang Yang Hong 3, has been conducting research in the Arabian Sea. The big worry for India is that although the survey fleet is ostensibly conducting oceanographic research — studying temperatures, currents and the like — China could also be gathering data to gain a military edge in the Indian Ocean.

To India's annoyance, the Xiang Yang Hong 3 docked twice in the Maldives capital, Male. Sri Lanka, following Indian pressure, announced January 1 it wouldn't allow Chinese research ships to dock even to replenish supplies but it has backed away from this tough stand and will allow restocking. Sri Lanka's back-pedalling came after Beijing blasted it for allowing a German survey ship to dock. Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena is now on a six-day visit to China where he'll meet the top leadership. A key factor influencing Sri Lanka's policy decisions is China holds 43 per cent of the country's debt.

One report indicates India may position its own research ship between two of the Chinese vessels but that would only have a nuisance value. India's capacity to play spoilsport is limited as it has only four research ships compared to China's 64.

While India holds the upper hand in the Indian Ocean, the waters are crucial to China as a mercantile nation. Its oil and other goods must perforce sail through the Indian Ocean

All these events are happening when the Indian Navy is facing intense pressure from different directions. Around 12 ships are patrolling the Red Sea and surrounding waters amid Houthi rebel attacks.

DEFENCE BUDGET

The Indian Navy, whose defence budgetary allocation has always been the lowest, is now on an expansion drive and aims to have at least 175 vessels by 2035, up from 150. But its fleet will still be dwarfed by China whose naval battle force includes hundreds of subs, mine warfare ships, aircraft carriers and other boats.

While India holds the upper hand in the Indian Ocean, the waters are crucial to China as a mercantile nation. Its oil and other goods must perforce sail through the Indian Ocean. India may have a much smaller navy but it's well-placed to cut off traffic coming via the Malacca Straits. "We still dominate the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean, definitely, although the Chinese are trying their best to create bases," says one senior defence expert.

To counter the Indian Navy, China has built a base in Djibouti and could possibly build a more limited one in Gwadar Pakistan and even Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

Apart from the Chinese, India also has to keep a watchful eye out for Pakistan which is believed to have received new ships from China and may even have a submarine on the way.

Building ships is an expensive proposition. India's navy gets just 12-18 per cent of the defence budget. To be adequately resourced, it would require at least 25 per cent, experts say. It's tough to see that happening. The navy will almost certainly have to manage with much less weaponry than it would like. "Once the Chinese have tackled or settled the Taiwan issue, their attention is likely to shift to the Indian Ocean," says the defence expert. It will need all the navy's ingenuity to counter the Chinese in the years to come.

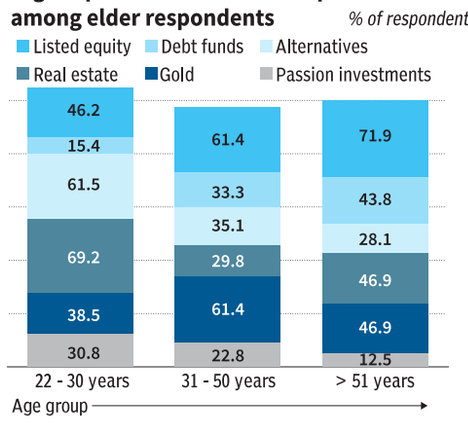
STATISTALK.

Compiled **Madhav Suresh** | Graphic **Visveswaran V**

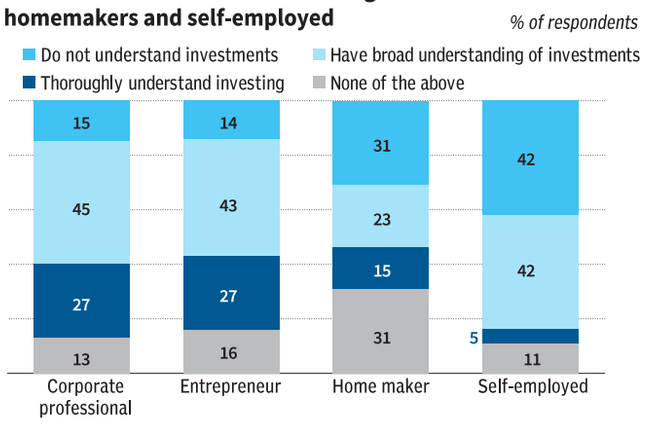
Investment trends of HNI women in India

Waterfield Advisors has unveiled key insights into the wealth management practices of high net worth individual (HNI) women (having a net worth of above ₹10 crore) in India through their study titled "Women of Wealth". The survey involved 104 female participants from various backgrounds residing in Tier 1 cities, aged between 22 and 60 years. Below are four charts depicting their evolving wealth management practises.

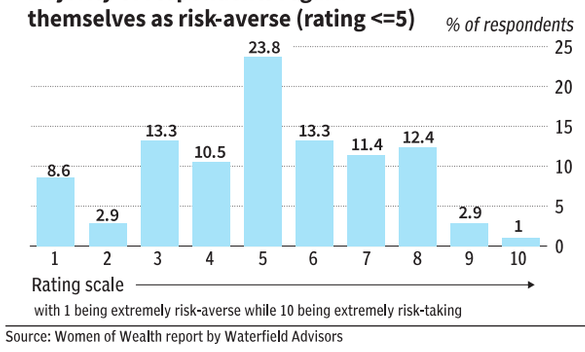
Higher preference for listed equities among elder respondents *% of respondents*



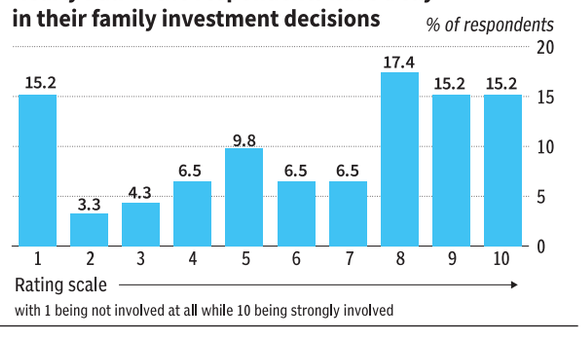
Investment awareness lower among homemakers and self-employed *% of respondents*



Majority of respondents regard themselves as risk-averse (rating <=5) *% of respondents*



Nearly half of the respondents have a say in their family investment decisions *% of respondents*



Source: Women of Wealth report by Waterfield Advisors

Short take

Asian economies have 'robust' crisis shields

Bloomberg News

Asian countries are much better positioned to weather economic storms than they were in the past, thanks to strong foreign reserves and sound financial-market development, a top Japanese central banker said.

"The current Asian economy is so robust," Bank of Japan Assistant Governor Tokiko Shimizu told a panel session on Tuesday at the Boao Forum in southern China.

"Even though the US and European countries have faced high inflation, high interest rates, Asian countries almost all are in good shape."

Many Asian central banks have boosted their foreign reserves over recent decades in a bid to ensure there's no repeat of the crisis that began in 1997, when a run on several currencies spread more broadly across other financial markets and triggered deep recessions.

Emerging economies in the region more than tripled their combined reserves between 2000 and 2008, even after adjusting for inflation, the Asian Development Bank estimated.

There's been a steep increase in advanced-economy interest rates over the past two years. In the past, that kind of move would often push Asian countries into deep crisis, but there's much greater resilience now, Shimizu said.

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

March 27, 2004

Bharti Tele inks outsourcing pact with IBM for $750 m

Bharti Televentures Ltd has inked an agreement with IBM to outsource its hardware, software and IT services requirements valued at $700-750 million spread over a period of 10 years. On the infrastructure front, IBM will consolidate Bharti's data centre, IT helpdesk and enhance its disaster recovery centre capabilities.

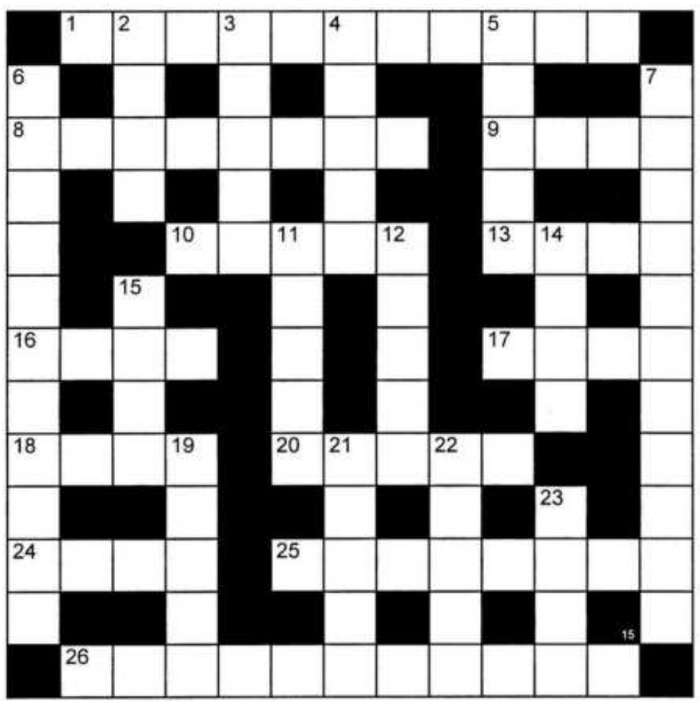
Inter-bank settlement system goes real time

The Reserve Bank of India initiated live operations on the real time gross settlement (RTGS) system in a limited manner among four banks. The banks — Standard Chartered Bank, State Bank of India, HDFC Bank and Saraswat Bank — have been conducting trials runs with mock transactions on the online clearing and settlement system for the past two months.

Louis Philippe set for a 'fragrant' foray

The premium apparel brand from the stable of Madura Garments, Louis Philippe, is likely to expand its portfolio into the fragrance business in the near future. The brand, which is the largest premium shirt and trouser brand in value and volume, is targeting a turnover in excess of ₹200 crore by the year 2007-08.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2404



EASY

ACROSS

1. Dispirited (11)
8. Draws out from (8)
9. Tub (4)
10. Devotional song (5)
13. Precipitation (4)
16. Tie up craft (4)
17. Labyrinth (4)
18. Tidy (4)
20. Correct the text (5)
24. Fighting force (4)
25. Rehearse (8)
26. Those attending hospital clinic (3-8)

DOWN

2. Form of words for swearing (4)
3. Approaches (5)
4. Praise (5)
5. Rome's river (5)
6. Harmful, undesirable (11)
7. Switches sides (7,4)
11. Living (5)
12. Small biting insect (5)
14. Oh dear me! (4)
15. Star suddenly flaring up (4)
19. Appointment to meet (5)
21. Excellence deserving honour (5)
22. Recess (5)
23. Heel over (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

1. Like a duvet, soft in the middle, depressed (11)
8. Draws out additional cots, nothing less (8)
9. 'The death of each day's life, sore Labour's _____ '(Macbeth) (4)
10. In the deep salmon discover something of David's (5)
13. A wet fall that quickly moved around one (4)
16. Open land to secure craft (4)
17. Hard to find one's way through corny stuff one has left (4)
18. Nothing added to the ox, cow or bull (4)
20. Change the text to find the writer in conclusion (5)
24. A lot of men upset Mary (4)
25. Carpet shaken: is included – try it! (8)
26. Are such hospital cases unconscious of being in clinic? (3-8)

DOWN

2. Bad language on which one is bound to be truthful (4)
3. Is not now far from the listener in opposing ways (5)
4. Sing the praises of former spouse, much being given up (5)
5. Roman flower (5)
6. Let tried man get sorted out? No: he's unsuitable! (11)
7. Switches to another cog (has never shifted!) (7,4)
11. Animated – kicking, too? (5)
12. For example, unintelligent upturn is a small irritation (5)
14. Sorrowful expression of a girl who has failed to finish (4)
15. Suddenly flaring, it appears Noah was curtailed around five (4)
19. Meeting heartless sot after an attempt (5)
21. Richly deserve it, after half the Summer has gone (5)
22. Place in the wall found by one well suited to working life (5)
23. Catalogue the strip cut from the edge (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2403

ACROSS 1. Nuisance 4. Frog 8. Gas 9. Local 10. Sob 11. Tremble 12. Yodel 13. Near-sighted 17. Eight 18. Vandals 20. Dog 21. Reins 22. Owe 23. Made 24. Reverent

DOWN 1. Negate 2. Issue 3. Cycle 5. Residue 6. Gobble 7. Playthings 9. Laboratory 14. Engaged 15. Seldom 16. Assert 18. Voice 19. Alone

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The secondary sex

Parties should have given the election ticket to more women

Women have been front and centre of the campaign for the upcoming parliamentary elections, with every party tailoring its poll promises to the needs of women, who account for nearly half the country's 968 million voters. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party, and the principal national Opposition party, the Congress, have been in a competitive race to attract this section of the electorate. Where the BJP-led government has broad-based women-focused health, education, and other programmes, the Congress has offered the Nari Nyay scheme, promising ₹1 lakh per annum in women's bank accounts and 50 per cent reservation in all recruitments in central-government jobs. Though the practicality of such extravagant promises remains an open question, it is striking how far political rhetoric lags practice for all parties. This point has become particularly moot after a special session of Parliament last year passed the 106th Amendment Act, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, reserving 33 per cent of seats in Parliament for women for 15 years. Since this provision will become operational after the delimitation exercise, all political parties have ample time to prepare their electoral rolls for this eventuality. Yet, in an unconscious demonstration of the lip service that political parties tend to pay to women's issues, no key party has an equivalent proportion of women on their party lists even now.

The BJP leads the race, with women accounting for about 17 per cent of the candidates it had announced up to March 25. With 66 women candidates so far, the party has steadily improved its record in terms of gender tally. In 2014, 38 of its 428 candidates were women; in 2019, it rose to 55 out of the 436 contestants. Preliminary lists from the Congress suggest about 12 per cent of the candidates are women. The real surprise is the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The party's list of 42 seats in West Bengal had 12 women candidates. However, the overall discouraging numbers are likely to represent an improvement over the 2019 Lok Sabha election, when women accounted for 9 per cent of all candidates. The 2019-24 Lok Sabha saw 78 women members, accounting for 14.3 per cent of the total, a modest total that nevertheless was the highest number in the country's history.

Though steady incremental improvement is encouraging, these numbers suggest that political parties will have some catching up to do when the women's reservations law kicks in. Currently, India lags the global average of women's representation in Parliament of 26.9 per cent by some margin, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The country stands at 144 out of 184 countries in the IPU's latest monthly global rankings of women in national parliaments. The journey of greater women's representation on corporate boards at 20 per cent of the total directors' pool from 15 per cent in 2019, though still low, shows that linear progression is possible. But to more than double the representation of women in Parliament as well as state and Union Territory Assemblies means that all parties will have to up their game in terms of female representation. While Parliament has passed a law and it will come into effect in due course, the 2024 Lok Sabha election was a good opportunity to demonstrate actual commitment.

Improving confidence

A healthy banking system will support growth

After a decade of rising non-performing assets (NPAs) and lax underwriting standards, particularly on corporate loans, the Indian banking sector is now in good health, with rising profits and the restoration of investor trust. This was reaffirmed in a recent survey of bankers conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry and the Indian Banks' Association. The survey, covering 23 banks, showed the sector continued to perform well on several parameters, including asset quality and credit growth. The survey findings also report that banks are well-positioned to transition to the expected credit loss (ECL) regime, and are taking steps towards climate adaptation and mitigation. These include focusing on green financing, going paperless, and implementing environmental campaigns like promoting bio-fencing in coastal regions as part of their ESG (environmental, social, and governance) initiatives.

About 83 per cent of the respondent banks reported unchanged or easing credit standards, citing a positive growth outlook for the economy, the decline in NPAs, and low sector-specific risks. There has also been an increase in long-term loan disbursements for certain sectors, including infrastructure, iron and steel, food processing, and pharmaceuticals. Notably, as identified by the respondent banks, these are also the sectors with higher levels of NPAs. If these sectors happen to get easy access to credit, the issue deserves attention. Banks must avoid getting into the high NPA cycle again. They, however, are generally optimistic about the level of stressed assets on their books, with 77 per cent of the respondent banks reporting a decrease in the NPA levels over the last six months. Over half the respondent banks in the current round say gross NPAs would be in the range of 3-3.5 per cent over the next six months. The optimism is not unfounded, given the sharp decline in gross NPAs from 11.6 per cent at the end of FY18 to 3.2 per cent in September last year. The slippage ratio, which measures new additions to bad loans, has also moderated. Naturally, low slippages will translate into improved asset quality across all bank groups.

It is indeed a relief that both public- and private-sector banks are in good health. However, concerns remain regarding future profitability. The survey finds a significant shift towards term deposits offering higher rates of interest. Nearly 70 per cent of the banks reported a decrease in the share of current account savings account (CASA) deposits in total deposits. CASA is low-cost deposits mobilised by banks, and lower amounts of low-cost deposits imply lower profit margins. Further, a significant number of fraud cases within the banking sector, along with high levels of interconnectedness between commercial banks and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs), can increase contagion during times of stress. The Reserve Bank of India has flagged the issues of interconnectedness in its recent publications. In this regard, NBFCs must be nudged to diversify their funding sources away from banks. Nonetheless, the overall improved health of the banking sectors should support growth momentum in the economy. The Union government has supported economic recovery from the pandemic through substantial increases in capital spending and it is now time for the private sector to push capex. A healthy bank balance sheet will help enable this transition.

The state of state budgets

With states expected to push the reforms agenda, a mechanism is needed for assessing their budget data

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Several states have by now presented their annual budgets for 2024-25. Unsurprisingly, many of them have made rosy projections and tall promises. Only time will tell if these announcements result in actual performance on the ground, either by fulfilling the promises made or through effective implementation of the policies outlined.

But going beyond the question of implementation, these budgets serve another purpose. They bring to light the actual and revised numbers that underlie those budgets presented in the last three years. The objective of this article is to use these budgets to assess how these states have done in the post-Covid period from 2021-22 to 2023-24, for which reliable numbers are now available. And perhaps compare that assessment with the trends seen in the Centre's budgets in the same years.

For obvious reasons, the numbers under study are actuals for the first two years (2021-22 and 2022-23) and revised estimates for the current financial year. A quick look at these budget numbers for about 20 large states (excluding Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, which are going into their respective Assembly elections in the coming weeks) offers many takeaways for those tracking India's public finance.



RAISINA HILL

A K BHATTACHARYA

On the question of these states' intent on fiscal consolidation, the picture is mixed. Quite a few states have failed to fulfil their fiscal deficit targets they had set for themselves at the time of presenting their budgets. In 2023-24, for instance, as many as seven states have produced a revised estimate of their fiscal deficit that is wider than what they had projected in the budget estimate. Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Rajasthan are guilty of not adhering to their own target, while Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh have barely managed to stay close to the number they had indicated.

Clearly, there is no pattern in this performance. If you thought the problem lies with eastern, north-eastern and hilly states, then what explains the poor performance of large states like Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Rajasthan? Equally puzzling is the none-too-encouraging performance of Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, which have otherwise run their public finances quite efficiently.

The list of states that have reduced their fiscal deficit from what they had promised in their budget estimates is even more interesting. These are: Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Tripura, Telangana, Goa, Jharkhand and Kerala. The only explanation here seems to be that relatively small states have managed better fiscal consolidation than their larger counterparts. The exceptions here are the states of Gujarat and West Bengal.

How has fiscal consolidation been for the states during the post-Covid years? Among the 20 states that have presented the Budget for 2024-25, as many as 13 states have run up a fiscal deficit in 2023-24, which is higher than what prevailed in 2021-22. These are Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Tripura. It is remarkable that some of the stronger states today have a fiscal deficit that is more than what they ran in 2021-22.

The states that have done well on this front are Delhi, Haryana, Karnataka, Punjab, West Bengal, Kerala and Telangana. They can rub shoulders with the Union government, which has not only bettered its fiscal deficit performance in each of these years, but has also effected an almost one percentage point decline in fiscal deficit during this period. However, the fact that many states, which are large and whose finances are run efficiently, could not bring their deficit down in this period is a cause for concern.

On capital expenditure, the Centre has succeeded in raising it from a level equivalent to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021-22 to 3.2 per cent in 2023-24. Something similar, and indeed better, has happened with the states. At the aggregate level, these 20 states have raised their capex as a percentage of their gross state domestic product (GSDP) from a lower level of 2.09 per cent to 3.36 per cent in the same period.

The surprise, however, comes from the states that led the charge in raising capex. These are Goa, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan, all of which have more than doubled their capital outlays as a percentage of GSDP. While states like Assam, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tripura have also raised their capex, though by lower margins, the states that have seen a worrying decline or only a marginal increase are Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, West Bengal and Haryana. The laggards in this area need to be closely studied to find out what went wrong in the overall push towards more infrastructure, an initiative that had been set in motion by the Centre, particularly after Covid.

The broad trajectory of growth in tax collections and revenue expenditure has been similar for both the Centre and these 20 states. The share of revenue spending by the Centre has stayed at 12-13 per cent of GDP, just as these 20 states also saw their revenue expenditure at about 13-13.5 per cent of GSDP.

The difference is with respect to tax revenue collections. The Centre has managed to keep its net tax collections at around 7-8 per cent of GDP in this period (not much different from the pre-Covid years), while these states have kept their own tax revenues at around 6.5-7 per cent of GSDP. But where the states have gained is from tax transfers from the Centre, which amounted to an additional 3-3.5 per cent of GSDP. If some states could not stay within their fiscal deficit targets even after such transfers, there is a need for bringing them under closer scrutiny.

This brings us to the larger question of why there is relatively less discussion and debate about the financial performance of state governments, compared to the sharp focus on the Centre's management of its finances. And this happens even though the total size of the states' budgets is now almost 18 per cent larger than that of the Centre's budget.

The absence of analysis of state finances, in sharp contrast to the general obsession with the Centre's budgets, is largely attributable to the relative lack of data on state budgets. Not only are the state budget data not easily available, but they are also presented in different formats by different state governments, making the task of comparison and analysis a little more onerous. The Reserve Bank of India does come out with an annual compendium of state budgets, but this comes after a lag of a few months.

At a time when the Centre is focusing more on the states, expecting them to shoulder the task of the next generation of economic reforms, it will be a good idea to create an institutional mechanism for periodic compilation and publication of state budget data in a format that makes their numbers comparable with those available for the Centre's budgets. India needs greater deliberation and debate over state finances. The first step towards facilitating that would be a better system for collecting and publishing state budget data.

Indian cities cry out for UMTA

As far back as 2006, the Central government, through the Ministry of Urban Development, released the National Urban Transport Policy, which recommended the creation of a Unified Metropolitan Transport Authority (UMTA) for all cities with a population above 1 million. According to the 2011 Census, there were 53 such cities.

In August 2017, the Union Cabinet cleared the new Metro Rail Policy, which laid down a framework for cities seeking to introduce and expand the role of their metro rail systems. Whilst many cities have committed to new metro rail projects, there has been little attempt to understand how any metro rail system fits within the overall public transport requirements of a city and its commuters. This policy made it clear that if a city wants central assistance for its metro rail project, its state government will have to commit to operationalising UMTA — a body that would then be responsible for all forms of urban transport. This would then enable an integrated approach to mobility in the city. Further, cities where metro projects are already under implementation have to consider setting up the UMTA within a year.



INFRATALK

VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

The 16th Report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Housing and Urban Affairs (2021-2022), commenting on the subject of metro rail projects, highlighted that it was "dismayed to note that despite a lapse of more than four years... States are yet to constitute UMTA."

To come to grips with the prevalent situation, The Infravision Foundation commissioned two focused sets of research — one by Geetam Tiwari of the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, and another by Sandip Chakrabarti of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad — both renowned transportation experts.

Dr Tiwari's report titled "A Framework for Selecting an Appropriate Urban Transport System in Indian Cities" concludes with five clear recommendations:

1. Different public transport systems are suitable for different travel patterns as determined by the trip length. Differentiated travel demand should guide the choice of public transport system to ensure that the majority of the citizens can access a high-quality public transport system. An integrated system can ensure high ridership of public transport, with all social benefits linked to realising a high ridership of the public transport system.

2. High-capacity systems like metro rail are very attractive for long trips. In large cities with populations exceeding 8 million, it's feasible to have 300-400 km of metro lines. However, it must have a robust, reliable network of bus systems operating on all arterial and partially on sub-arterial roads, totalling about 800-1,000 km. Last-mile connectivity can be facilitated through walking and intermediate public transport options such as autos. Integrating the three systems at a policy, planning, design and regulatory framework level will ensure a high-quality public transport system. Feeder bus routes can effectively serve as a means of connecting passengers to metro stations, eliminating the need for special feeder buses.

3. Travel demand in cities with 4-8 million population can be well-served by a bus system running on all arterial and sub-arterial routes. For about 20 per cent trips longer than 10 kms, light rail transport (LRT) or bus rapid transit systems (BRTS) can be introduced to complement the bus network. Last-mile connectivity can be achieved by walking and intermediate public transport. Cities with more than 1 million population should start planning high-capacity systems like BRTS/metro lines as an integrated system.

4. In cities with lower populations (less than 1 million), it is advisable to invest in a high-quality bus system to meet travel demand effectively. Planning for high-capacity systems like metro should be considered only if the city is projected to grow beyond 1 million and is expected to reach a population of over 24 million within the next 10 years.

5. Travel demand in cities with less than 5,00,000 population can be met by improved intermediate public transport services and a small bus route running on arterial and sub-arterial roads.

Dr Chakrabarti's report titled "Strategies to Improve the Financial Performance of Metro Rail System in India" harps extensively on the UMTA as a clear line of attack. In summary, he advocates a four-pronged move, which is:

- The UMTA should take over ownership, operations and maintenance of all non-privatised transportation infrastructure in the city, including roads and all modes of public transit. Consequently, all city or metropolitan area-specific transportation-related functions, such as policy formulation, strategic planning, project appraisals and approvals, project implementation, operations and maintenance, funding, and research should be the responsibility of the UMTA.
- The UMTA can appoint contractors for any of the functions and enter into equity partnerships with private sector entities when required or feasible. It will also be responsible for managing, regulating and licensing the private transportation service network layer (app-based ride-hailing), micro-mobility layer (shared bicycles and electric scooters) and the city logistics layer (e-commerce deliveries, goods movement, warehousing, etc).
- Traffic control, integrated mobility payment systems (example, transit smart cards), multimodal system data collection and real-time travel information provision should also be the UMTA's responsibility.
- The UMTA would be required to initiate major institutional changes and systematic transfers of ownership of transportation assets and functions across cities.

Many international cities cited as models for public transport have such an overarching body to plan, execute and run all aspects of urban mobility. These include the New York City Transit Authority, Transport for London, and Singapore's SBS Transit and SMRT.

Indian cities, too, need to put commuters at the centre of their transportation decision-making. A unified metropolitan transport authority is an inescapable and urgent precondition.

The writer is an infrastructure expert. He is also the founder and managing trustee of The Infravision Foundation

Bihar's half revolution

BOOK REVIEW

ADITI PHADNIS

The research is meticulous and extensive. The analysis of how Bihar slid into a development morass and then tried to climb out of it is penetrating and perceptive. Caste rules everything, ranging from intellectual pursuit to crime in Bihar, and in this book, too, a caste slant creeps in almost unseen and possibly inadvertently.

The book is organised as a political history of the state. So Pataliputra, the centre of the all-India empire of the Maurya dynasty, the establishment of universities such as Nalanda and Vikramshila; the home of mathematicians and scientists such as Aryabhata; the birthplace of two seminal religions that challenged caste orthodoxy, Buddhism and Jainism; and the development of Sher Shah Suri's Grand Trunk Road that passed through Bihar, is discussed.

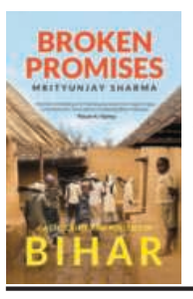
But how could a state that had all that come to this? A 2012 paper by two academics is quoted by the author. It explains how the land revenue system called Permanent Settlement introduced by Lord Cornwallis (1793) delinked revenue from agricultural output and proved to be a disincentive to improve agricultural productivity. This was in contrast to the Ryotwari system in the Madras and Bombay provinces that led to capital formation and investment in agri-productivity, catapulting both regions as centres of industrialisation.

The Freight Equalisation Policy between 1952 and 1993 also had a role to play in depriving Bihar of the comparative advantage it could have had in developing value-added activities and mineral-based industries. As a result, Bihar's gross domestic product (GDP) remained heavily dependent on agriculture and, over time, land became virtually the only factor of production.

The book does discuss the years in between but the bulk of the book is about the interplay of land, caste, crime and politics between 1990 and 2005, the year of "Jungle Raj" in Bihar. During these years, the author says, "the government de-emphasised the state's urgent development issues in order to pursue the ostensibly higher goals of social empowerment". He adds that recruitment to public posts and development expenditure were highly curtailed in the belief that this would primarily benefit the upper castes. The central government was also culpable: Allocation of resources away from states such as Orissa and Bihar led to underfunding of infrastructure, health and education.

Earlier efforts led by Congress chief minister Sri Krishna Sinha to abolish the zamindari system in 1950 were followed by the Land Ceiling Act in 1956 that mandated land holdings of no more than 30 acres in the plains and 50 acres in the hills. To retain their hold, landlords resorted to proxy ownership, along with other strategies. None of them involved large-scale industrialisation. So feudalism and caste combined to illustrate the maxim of St Just, a leader of the French Revolution: "When you make a revolution half-way, you dig your grave".

How the Congress leadership, dominated by upper castes, managed to make even a half-way revolution is a story in itself. The asymmetry between economic and social power would become the dominant discourse in politics: An upper caste Congress leadership seeking to "steer" the Other Backward Classes (OBC), newly empowered by land legislation and beneficiaries of land redistribution. To keep the OBCs in control, an upper caste mafia was encouraged during Bindeshwari Dubey's tenure (1985-88). The OBCs and lower castes were slow to respond but they too formed their own gangs of brigands.



BROKEN PROMISES: Caste, Crime and Politics in Bihar
Author: Mrityunjay Sharma
Publisher: Westland Books
Pages: 333
Price: ₹699

And thus arrived Bihar's "darkness at noon" moment: The ascent and development of a kind of leadership Bihar had not seen ever before, in the rise of Lalu Prasad and the end of "feudal democracy" of the Congress era.

So much has been written about Lalu Prasad that you'd have thought there was nothing more to say. But the author chronicles in detail, the growth and development of gangs, the inability and eventual retreat of the state in its capacity to deal with them and Lalu Prasad's sublime indifference to development. The rallying cry was *"bhurabal saaf karo"* (clear out the brown hair, bhurabal being an acronym for upper caste Bhumihar-Rajput-Brahmin-Lala or Kayasth).

Experiments to empower OBCs — mainly Yadavs — by moves such as starting Charwaha Vidyalaya (Herders University) were symbolic interventions, politically meaningful but administrative failures.

In any event, after 15 years of Lalu Prasad, when Bihar got Nitish Kumar as chief minister, the base was so low that the latter could only have taken the state up.

The book discusses how instruments in law, policy and bureaucracy were used by Nitish Kumar to wrest back administrative control. He used the Arms Act to lock up mafia gang lords hand-picking Abhayanand, as director general of police. But no less was the role of P K Shahi who was appointed advocate general. Armed with a selected bureaucracy, Nitish Kumar embarked upon a turnaround story that illustrates a new reality in Indian politics — that the way to the heart of a voter is via an accessible police station. Mayawati and Yogi Adityanath would follow a similar strategy in UP.

But by the time Nitish Kumar's first tenure ended, caste politics had resurfaced. The effort now was to empower the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) and focus on Pasmanda Muslims (lower caste Muslims). His compromise with upper caste ganglords illustrated the limits to administrative restructuring. Despite efforts, the "Bihari" identity could not supplant caste. Migration and the readiness to do low-paid jobs became a fact of life to the point where "even the Nepalese look down upon Biharis". *Even* the Nepalese? Really?

Barring a few such throwaway remarks, the book is an excellent study of caste, class, crime and politics in Bihar, recommended most highly for students of public policy and the politics of India.

The Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Heed UN call for ceasefire

The war in Gaza has gone on for too long with too many lives lost. It needs to stop, and now

For the first time since Israel's bombardment and targeting of Gaza began nearly six months ago, the UN Security Council has called for an immediate ceasefire in what is one of the world's most densely populated regions. Israel would do well to heed the call to end its onslaught. More than 32,000 Palestinians have died — with the daily death toll higher than that of any major conflict in recent years — while millions are grappling with homelessness, hunger and disease at a time when large swathes of Gaza have been razed. There is a groundswell of popular opinion against Israel's actions in Europe, the US and West Asia. Every other day of war will mean Israel losing more friends and the prospect of a stable West Asia receding.

However much the US may argue that its decision to abstain, after vetoing three previous resolutions, is not a shift in policy, the outcome at the Security Council points to a change of stance by Washington. In an election year, the Biden administration has realised that the collateral cost of providing unfettered support to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's actions can be high. Legal experts believe the resolution, which seeks an immediate ceasefire in Ramzan that can lead to a lasting truce, is binding on Israel. In such circumstances, it is bewildering to hear Israeli leaders still talking about plans to invade Rafah city in southern Gaza.

These latest developments have come at a time when Russia, China, and Iran are more closely coordinating their positions and stepping up efforts to influence politics in West Asia. The Islamic State (IS) attack in Russia has added another layer to existing geopolitical instability, especially since Moscow seems set to play up a purported link to Ukraine rather than probe the IS' involvement. Any actions that lead to further instability in West Asia are sure to impact the struggling global economy, and no country is likely to be able to insulate itself.

The people of Gaza have been through hell for brutal crimes perpetrated by Hamas. Families have been wiped out and a famine now looms large. Unrestricted provision of humanitarian aid is crucial, but a ceasefire is even more important. All hostages taken by Hamas must be freed and Israel must stop the war before talks on other aspects — including institutional governance for Gaza and a two-State solution — can take centrestage.

Engage with Ladakh's sense of alienation

Ladakhi activist Sonam Wangchuk ended his 21-day hunger strike in Leh on Tuesday. However, his demands have found resonance among the local population. The Centre needs to engage with them. Some of his demands — rooted in the context of Ladakh, which has a sensitive ecology, and lies on the border with China, which harbours expansionist ambitions in this mountainous region — are valid.

Ladakh is a sparsely populated high-altitude cold desert sensitive to the climate crisis. Wangchuk's critique of the State's development agenda for the region needs to be considered in this context. Tourism has been an important part of the Ladakhi economy, but scaling up can harm the region's environment. The proposed mega airport in Leh and a solar park spread over 20,000 hectares in the Changthang pastures need a relook. Development plans need to be sensitive to ecology and local concerns.

Wangchuk, however, has located his demands in the broader political economy of the region, which explains the call to extend the constitutional provisions under the Sixth Schedule to Ladakh: The Sixth Schedule will help guard Ladakh's unique social and cultural features. Since 2019, Ladakh and Kargil have been reduced to a Union Territory and represented by an MP in the Lok Sabha. There may well be a case to have separate representatives for these two distinct regions, even if they are too sparsely populated to merit two parliamentary constituencies. However, Sixth Schedule status could introduce devolution of powers to the grassroots, which can, to some extent, address the larger sense of alienation the region has felt while it was governed from Srinagar in the past or New Delhi now. Similarly, the fear of Chinese encroachment on Indian pasture land should not be brushed aside. These are important concerns over which a conversation that includes local communities is needed. The Centre needs to assure them that the interests of Ladakh are on top of the rest of India's mind.

How Chipko resonated beyond the Himalayas

The Chipko Andolan lost its ground at home, but its legacy lies in people's ecological movements that emerged elsewhere in the country



A delegation of the Himalaya Seva Sangh discussing ecological problems with former home minister Hirubhai M Patel in New Delhi in 1979 HT ARCHIVE



Madhav Gadgil

Given my interest in people's ecological movements, I was greatly fascinated by the Chipko Andolan in Garhwal. Chandi Prasad Bhatt was a key actor in this movement, and I quickly contacted him. He and his colleagues in the Sarvodaya movement began organising a series of eco-development camps in the Alakananda valley as a follow-up to Chipko. I was delighted to join one of these in the Bemru village in 1981. Bemru was way up the steep slope from the Alaknanda valley; these slopes had a fragile cover formed from ocean sediment. Over time, they had been covered by oak and rhododendron trees that held the soil and water firmly together, preventing erosion or landslides. It was dotted by tiny villages settled on the plateaus. It was the dream of Mahatma Gandhi that India would come to be constituted as a Republic of such self-reliant villages, a vision that inspired Chandi Prasad.

All of us in the camp worked without any distinction of class or caste, and in the evenings, we sat down to discuss what was happening in the Alakananda valley and what our response should be. There was free discussion in simple language led by a physics professor from Gopeshwar College, but stonemasons who fabricated the water mills also provided their inputs. Unfortunately, the government had a monopoly on water resources, and its only interest was to construct giant projects like Tehri to supply power to the national Capital.

A major source of strength of Garhwal villages was the *van panchayats* under their control. The powers that be were bent upon suppressing movements like Chipko lest their influence spread and challenged the ruling class's development model of favouring the rich at the cost of people and nature. They now had in hand the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act extending the power of the forest department over the entire country. This was used to render *van panchayats* dysfunctional and to harass the Chipko activists. This was brought home to me in 1993 when I accompanied Chandi Prasad on a visit to Lata, the village of Gaura Devi, who led the hugging of trees to prevent their being cut. We were stunned when a group of villagers stopped us on the boundary shouting: "Chandi Prasad, *wapas jao*" (Chandi Prasad, go back). When the atmosphere cooled, we entered the village to understand what had been happening. They told us that the level of harassment of the villagers by the forest department had increased after the village women's participation in the Chipko Movement. Taking advantage of the fact that Lata lay in the buffer zone of Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, they cut off the villagers' access to all forest resources, leaving them worse off than they had been before Chipko. The foresters' action was a complete perversion of the biosphere reserve concept developed by UNESCO, which visualises the government machinery and local communities working together for conservation — compatible development.

While the protest from the Himalayas was snuffed out, it stimulated a different kind of people's movement, this time by the Marxist Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP). Inspired by Chipko, KSSP embraced the slogan "Science for social revolution" in the 1970's. One of its earliest interventions was a documentation of the environmental and social impacts of the Grasim Rayon factory at Mavoor on the Chaliyar river. The factory received bamboo at ₹1 per tonne while the market rate was ₹1,400. Despite this great advantage, the management refused to adopt pollution control measures, citing profitability concerns, and recklessly releasing poisonous effluents into the air and the river. This caused serious health problems and the destruction of livelihoods dependent on shellfisheries, lime kilns, and banana plantations. The pollution control board took no notice, and none of the government laboratories agreed to analyse water samples. Fortunately, the Indian Institute of Science's labs came forward to analyse the samples and showed that the water had mercury, lead, nickel, cobalt, iron, chromium zinc, and copper levels above the permissible limit. This helped strengthen local resistance, which forced the factory to close after a long struggle

KSSP's most effective intervention was in Silent Valley, a unique natural ecosystem. Its interdisciplinary study showed that energy conservation would be more cost-effective in making available the amount of energy that the project might generate. Its public science parliament in 1980 attracted a huge crowd that engaged in a lively discussion. This, in part, made Silent Valley a celebrated environmental cause and eventually persuaded the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to drop the project.

KSSP vigorously participated in the literacy mission launched in 1986 and followed this up with the *panchayat*-level resource mapping programme for neo-literates. This was followed by the People's Planning Campaign of 1995-96 in which every *panchayat* of Kerala mapped its natural, social and financial resources and developed a locally appropriate management programme. This became the model for the Biological Diversity Act provision of Biodiversity Management Committees in all local bodies in the country. This was used by the Kadanad *panchayat* in Kottayam, which demonstrated that rock quarries would damage local biodiversity. This documentation was accepted by the Kerala high court, which recommended in 2012 that rock quarries be banned. Regrettably, vested interests forced the *panchayat* to withdraw its objection; but, an important step had been taken.

Given the smartphone and social media penetration in the country today, a WhatsApp group of *panchayats* of Kerala serves to promote the preparation of people's biodiversity registers as a device for local communities to decide on management options for their own local ecosystems. The spark that Chipko Andolan lit 50 years ago is thus promising to ignite fires far and wide.

Madhav Gadgil is an ecologist, and founded the Centre for Ecological Studies at the Indian Institute of Science. The views expressed are personal

Krishna award debate: Missing caste for music

Social and other media have been agog with news of the diatribe against TM Krishna by musicians who have found it offensive that he should be conferred the "prestigious" Sangeetha Kalanidhi award by The Music Academy, Chennai. These critics have grandly announced that they will not perform on the Academy stage in the forthcoming music season. While the matter of the award itself is not of significance to anyone except those who follow Carnatic music, and who view The Music Academy with awe and respect, the issue needs to be unpacked for what it tells us about the enduring bigotry of the entitled Tamil Brahmin community — and how, for well over a century and more, it has continued to read any and every criticism of its mores and ways as an attack on Hindu cultural and religious values.

A few individuals and institutions created by them might consider themselves progressive, being supporters of liberal-Left politics, and, at times, the Dravidian movement. But Tamil Brahmins, as a community, have been remarkably un-reflexive besides being prone to projecting themselves as wronged and misunderstood. To affirm their "victim" status, they have created a narrative whose details comprise the following: Their caste is attacked because they are successful and meritorious, and so criticisms are nothing but jealousy; their caste has been vilified and tormented for decades, thanks to the anti-Brahmin movement led by Periyar EV Ramasamy, who had called for their annihilation; those who seek to criticise them are unwilling to take note of reformers and change-makers in the community, be it about music or social customs; and finally, it is not so much the Brahmins who practise discrimination against Dalits, but the non-Brahmin castes.



V Geetha

The letters written by musicians Ranjani and Gayatri, Chitravina N Ravikiran, and the Trichur Brothers, protesting the award given to Krishna, feature one or more of these themes. Periyar is vilified, Krishna is seen as a divisive influence, with no regard for the diversity of talents in any culture (in this view, Brahmins stand in for diversity), and as being careless and dismissive of all things that constitute "our" spiritual and cultural traditions. But there are other questions we need to ask here. The caste bigotry on display in this instance appears to be locked in battle with a certain unmarked liberalism, and which has become associated with the award as such.



It is clear from TM Krishna's musical experiments that he views music as a means to address caste-based inequality HT ARCHIVE

But what is this award, granted by a resolutely patrician institution, one viewed as a bastion of the twice-born? Admittedly, for a musician, even one like Krishna who has looked to break many boundaries which Carnatic musicians have drawn around their universe, the world of music *sabhas*, their patrons and the constituency that supports this music cannot be put away entirely. The music he practises is situated within this universe and besides, there are likely affective and pedagogic relationships that he has experienced here, and which matter to him. On the other hand, this is a closely guarded class-caste world and, expectedly, it has been pointed out that if he was not of the Brahmin caste, his transgressions would not have been overlooked by the award committee.

This manner of accommodating what could potentially be subversive makes it difficult to view the situation with equanimity. Consider how the president of the Academy has defended the latter's choice of Krishna as an awardee. He has noted that awards are based on the "sole criterion" of "musical excellence demonstrated over a significant and sustained career", and are made with no "extraneous factors influencing" the Academy's choice. This is intriguing, for it is clear from Krishna's various musical experiments that he views music as a means to address caste-based inequality and discrimination and has been vocal both about his art and its shaping contexts. What is this liberalism that can be adopted by critics of the award with aplomb, but yet not engage with the extraneous social contexts that produce "excellence" and its many measures in any cultural field? In other words, why did the president of the Academy remain content with characterising the protesters as giving into personal dislike and malingering, and not take note of their founded social hatred, so evident in the language used by all protesters?

It is as if bigotry might be spoken of, but not the caste universe that sustains it. As far as Carnatic music is concerned, this would require a critical soiling of its spiritual sources, a profaning of its aesthetics in and through the invocation of its gendered and caste contexts. Equally, it would require engaging with anti-caste traditions and their thought worlds. Krishna has done both, but to award him for his music and not engage with the issues the musician has raised is somewhat disingenuous, and an instance of what Periyar characterised as the self-validating universe of Brahmanism. In order to explain this, Periyar noted: "Rajaji will eat at a '*panchama's*' house; Shankaracharya will bathe on seeing a '*panchama*'; some will bathe if a '*panchama's*' shadow falls on them, others if a '*panchama*' touches them. Yet others will marry a '*panchama*' man or woman — but all of them will still remain *brahmanas*" (*Viduthalai*, March 4, 1969).

Periyar would go on to observe that this winning flexibility enabled the Brahmin to rework the terms of any debate to his advantage while foregoing an engagement with what cannot be accommodated. The problem then is not only the bigotry of the Hindu Right group in the Carnatic music universe, but also the limits set to critique and debate through these modalities of accommodation and recognition.

V Geetha is a Chennai-based social historian and activist. The views expressed are personal

{ YOAV GALLANT } ISRAELI MINISTER OF DEFENCE

We will operate against Hamas, including places where we have not yet been... We have no moral right to stop the war while there are still hostages held in Gaza



HT

Behind the terror attack in Moscow

The March 22 attack by the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) in a concert hall in Moscow is one of the most significant terror incidents in terms of casualties. It claimed over 200 lives. In recent years, the world has witnessed a series of assaults by the Islamic State (IS) on Russia, including a failed synagogue attack in Moscow and the 2022 assault on the Russian Embassy in Afghanistan. The latest attack transcends a mere act of war against the State. Initial investigations have revealed that the shooters belonged to Tajikistan. However, further analysis of the IS and Russia relations suggests that these "*jihadi*" volunteers belonged to the IS' Caucasus branch, operating in Russia's predominantly Muslim North Caucasus region, particularly in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria.



Soumya Awasthi

Analysts posit that ISKP has harboured opposition against Vladimir Putin, often condemning his intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 and his support for President Bashar al-Assad against the IS. The majority of IS members present in Syria belong to the Caucasus region. Chechnya's history of resistance against Moscow's authority fostered an Islamic insurgency, leading to armed conflicts between Russia and militants from 2007 to 2017. This region evolved into an IS recruitment hub. In October 2002, Chechen insurgents seized approximately 800 hostages at a Moscow theatre. Then, in October 2015, an IS-planted bomb downed a Russian passenger plane over Sinai, Egypt, claiming the lives of 224 individuals, predominantly Russian tourists. In recent times, the group has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in Russia.

The North Caucasus is important to the IS due to several factors. The region, located in southern Russia, has historically served as a key source of foreign fighters for the IS. It has witnessed conflicts between indigenous populations and the advancing Russian presence for centuries. In 1994, a war commenced, marked by Russia's military intervention aimed at quelling a push for independence in Chechnya. The Russian intervention sparked a regional insurgency, increasingly intertwined with radical Islamist ideologies and spreading across the North Caucasus. It fuelled radicalisation and recruitment to IS — approximately a quarter of the 30,000- 40,000 foreign fighters who joined IS were from the former Soviet Union.

The Caucasus Emirate, established in 2007, played a central role in expanding militant activities across the region in response to Russia's presence, policing methods, and corruption. By 2012, militants from Chechnya and other North Caucasian areas began participating in the Syrian conflict, initially under the Caucasus Emirate's banner. However, factional divisions led to the emergence of groups like Jaysh al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar, which pledged allegiance to the IS. The defection of critical commanders to the IS, combined with the latter's rapid rise and declaration of a caliphate, attracted radicalised individuals in the North Caucasus, leading to most militant groups pledging allegiance to the IS between 2014 and 2015.

The establishment of the IS's regional branch, Vilayat Kavkaz, supplanted the Caucasus Emirate but failed to yield significant military gains, resulting instead in group fragmentation and small-scale attacks orchestrated by sleeper cells. The Russian government has faced accusations of enabling the migration of potential militants from the North Caucasus to Syria and Iraq via Turkey. Between 2012 and 2015, approximately 2,900 Russian radicals and members of illegal armed groups reportedly travelled to Syria via Turkey, ultimately joining the IS. The objective behind Russian facilitation was to divert the conflict and rising threat of IS on Russian territory. Another possible reason for the conflict between IS and Moscow was Putin's support to the Assad government so that it could have a pivotal role in West Asia and counter the United States's influence in the region.

Concerns persist regarding the level of sympathy and support for IS among the North Caucasus population, fuelled by perceptions of social injustice, government corruption, and economic disparities. Grievances stemming from practices such as extrajudicial executions, abduction, and torture, particularly in Chechnya, alongside policies penalising families of militants, further exacerbate tensions. The illegal migrants and those detained by the Russian authorities for overstaying beyond visa permits are victims of violence and discrimination. The sense of victimhood is used against the State for recruitment. Additionally, the plight of individuals who joined the IS and Russia's repatriation efforts have heightened the potential for radicalisation.

The North Caucasus remains pivotal for the IS's radicalisation and recruitment efforts due to high levels of sympathy and support at the grassroots. Addressing the root causes of radicalisation is imperative to mitigate the threat of violent extremism, with a focus on socio-economic grievances, inclusive governance, and engagement with moderate voices. International cooperation is also crucial in combating the evolving security landscape.

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OUR VIEW

ISTOCKPHOTO



EV success may require some exposure to China

Greater reliance on Chinese input suppliers in the near term might be inescapable but the prospect of India emerging as an EV-making hub would outweigh its potential downside

India's policy focus on making the country a hub for EV-making will have a side effect. As electric vehicles (EVs) roll off assembly lines, our dependence on Chinese imports will rise, even though we've been trying to reduce it. That's because China, with a head-start of a decade or so, is the global leader of clean-tech in general and this segment of the auto industry in particular. A report by Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) highlights this trade-off. Our latest EV thrust, led by a policy carve-out that envisions a competitive EV industry behind low tariff barriers, is likely to result in greater shipments from China, which dominates the global value chain (GVC) of EV batteries, going all the way back to lithium, a key mineral. In the next few years, according to the report, "every third EV and many passenger and commercial vehicles on [Indian] roads could be those made by Chinese firms." This isn't a scenario New Delhi will be comfortable with as ties with Beijing fray amid geopolitical tension, territorial disputes and economic competition. We don't have much choice, though. China embarked on an EV drive before others and is well ahead on cost compression. While India has a lot of catching up to do, the race has only just begun and so we can still hope to vie for global leadership. Auto-making in India has always been done behind high tariffs, but with EVs, a new story could possibly be scripted.

Currently, about 70% of the materials used to make EVs in India are imported from China and other countries, according to the GTRI report. The People's Republic is home to an estimated three-fourths of the world's battery capacity, an input that typically accounts for between a third and 40% of an EV's cost. Separately, in a recent study to assess the exposure of our factories to overseas GVCs, chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran and his team found that between 2000 and 2022, China's share of foreign inputs purchased by Indian manufacturers shot up from 5% to 23%, with America's share as our next major source-country far lower, at only 6%. This is a significant dependency, overall. If GTRI's forecasts pan out without equivalent reductions in other industries, an adversarial country could exceed a quarter of India's GVC exposure. Although this is a sign of how interlinked today's globalized world is, the US-led West has blatantly flouted free-trade ideals in trying to squeeze Chinese exports and Indian interests can be argued to lie in adopting a similar stance. After the Galwan border clash in 2020, New Delhi sought to dissuade Chinese participation in our economy. Now with a new EV policy that's likely to draw shiploads of cargo from China, should we worry about the disruption risks this would entail?

Much of what goes into cars is already made locally. We have yet-to-be-exploited lithium deposits in Jammu and Kashmir and Rajasthan. Given time, self-sufficiency is conceivable. But for now, Chinese inputs seem inevitable, so we must weigh what could go wrong against the gains of India emerging as an EV hub, an aim that would be hobbled without access to the world's cheapest usable components. Today's emphasis should be on making headway as an EV-making country to rival China in markets abroad. If a step-up in Chinese participation—say, via joint ventures with Indian firms—serves this purpose, we should accept it without flinching. To mitigate risk, we could zoom out and work out plans for other industries with easier paths to exposure reduction. But let this anxiety not get in the way of India's EV bet.

THEIR VIEW

Financial regulation in India is far better than it gets credit for

Ensuring the system holds up under market stress is better than moderating investor risk appetites



SOMNATH MUKHERJEE
is chief investment officer, ASK Private Wealth.

India is an emerging market (EM), an expression that made its debut in the 1990s, as it seemed more polite than the 'developing country' moniker in vogue earlier. On most macro-economic metrics—per-capita income, consumption, infrastructure—India is indeed an EM, far below the levels of developed markets (DMs). In one area though, India is at par with the world's best: financial services. Our financial market infrastructure has consistently set global benchmarks. We adopted a fully screen-based stock market trading platform with NSE several years before the New York Stock Exchange migrated to a fully-online model. Instant inter-bank third-party fund transfers was pioneered by India in the early 2000s, years before the rich world caught on to it, and innovations like UPI have kept up India's lead on innovation.

Along with infrastructure, India also performs well on the quality of financial regulation. Especially the two main regulators, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). By maintaining policy prudence and embracing technology early, regulators have helped place key markers of Indian markets at par with DMs.

India's market volatility, for example, is in the league of DMs rather than EMs. Over the last couple of years, the Nifty Vix (the index tracking its volatility) has regularly traded lower than the US Vix. This is remarkable, as EMs are expected to show higher volatility, given their various market imperfections. Several factors deserve credit for this. First is the creation of a large pool of domestic investors whose savings are channelled into equities via mutual funds (MFs). This enables a sticky pool of local retail savings to act as a buffer against sudden outflows from the portfolios of global investors and wealthy individuals.

Second is strong regulatory oversight that keeps leveraged positions in Indian markets at modest levels. This is contrary to recent worries about high levels of leverage suspected of ballooning futures and options (F&O) volumes. How? For starters, the book of total loans-against-shares in India, between banks and NBFCs, is estimated at just ₹50-60,000 crore, a tiny fraction of India's overall market capitalization. Further, F&O positions are skewed towards options in India. Globally, option volumes are around the same level as futures, but in India, options are 50-100 times futures. Why is this important? Because option contracts represent far lower risk of systemic liquidation than futures. Further, thanks to large margin requirements of brokers, a significant proportion of F&O volumes in India are intra-day strategies that get squared up before market close and don't constitute overnight systemic risk. Low leverage moderates volatility spikes during periods of market stress and cushions investors from panic decisions.

Overall, India's capital markets regulation has been a great case study. However, as our markets and investors mature, regulation needs to be further finessed. Enhanced market volatility is not a systemic risk unless there is risk of institutional failures arising out of it. If an investor is investing in options or a small-cap stock, she has the individual agency to do so. The question is whether she has all relevant information while making that decision. Investors need to be armed with information and disclosures, not protected from volatility.

Risks emerge from liquidity, often ahead of even fundamentals. The global financial crisis (GFC) in 2008 was an example, when even fundamentally sound assets had gap downs.

Sebi's new liquidity stress test guidelines for MFs is a start. But it needs significant work for systemic-risk objectives to be met. Extrapolating near-term liquidity into the future is fraught with risk, especially in small and mid-cap (SMID) stocks. It has repeatedly been seen in market downturns that liquidity dries up at SMID counters in a heartbeat. Further, the ability of any single MF to access 10% of available trading volumes on a gap-down day could be unrealistic, as multiple MFs will likely be pressing sell buttons on the same stocks. Illiquid parts of an MF portfolio being gated under high redemption pressure is unfair to investors who stay back. Ergo, the bigger systemic questions are somewhat different.

One, do certain types of structures, like SMID MFs, lend themselves to open-ended, daily liquidity?

Two, under redemption pressure, is it appropriate for a fund manager to generate liquidity by liquidating the most liquid parts of the portfolio?

Institutional risks are greater when institutions do not manage to fairly meet their commitments to the broader market. A big driver for the GFC was liquidity drying up in structures (essentially money market MFs) that promised to provide liquidity on demand.

From a systemic standpoint, ensuring that systemic promises made are upheld during market stress is more crucial than moderating individual investor risk appetites.

Indian markets have set blue-riband standards. As India climbs global charts on both macro and market indicators, regulation needs to keep identifying critical risk factors and treat them appropriately.

These are the author's personal views.

10 YEARS AGO



MINT METRIC
by Bibek Debroy

Traction lost because of someone's blunder,
Viewers watched with amused wonder.
A train stuck on the track,
Physically pushed, as the only hack.
What happened to the reform thunder?

THEIR VIEW

Basic subsidies can be climate focused and aimed better

AMAR PATNAIK



is a member of the Rajya Sabha from Odisha, a former CAG bureaucrat and an advocate.

The allocation of about one-ninth of India's total budget spending on food and fertilizer subsidies in 2023-24 and similar amounts in preceding years underscores a need to examine this expenditure. While acknowledging the welfare benefits of these two subsidies, we should explore if these benefits could be better targeted, and with fewer environmental consequences, without reducing the annual outlay.

Promote organic fertilizers: India's budget data indicates a consistent upward trajectory in its fertilizer subsidies since 2017. While these have boosted fertilizer consumption, crop yields have fallen over this period, a decline that can be attributed to farmers' excessive application of nitrogen fertilizers, driven largely by subsidy-induced price distortions. A worsening imbalance in nutrient use has led to depletion in soil fertility. Urea consumption has outpaced other essential nutrients like PKS complexes and SSP to such an extent that NPK use ratio reached 11.8:4.6:1 in 2022-23, as against the ideal use-ratio of 4:2:1. Farms must move towards organic fertilizers, bio-fertilizers and phosphate-rich organic manure.

The country needs comprehensive structural reforms in fertilizer management and a sustainable transition plan that extends beyond expressions of intent and aligns with our net-zero emission goal. Rather than abruptly reducing the use of conventional chemical fertilizers, an effective strategy could be to subsidize nano fertilizers (both inorganic and organic), which are cost-effective, conducive to reducing carbon intensity and offer benefits such as higher average yields, alongside improved soil health. This can be an intermediate step to reduce overuse of chemical fertilizers before shifting entirely to farm production based on organic fertilizers. Additionally, promoting natural farming methods is vital.

As a starting point, we should consolidate the oversight of fertilizers under the agriculture ministry by shifting its department from the chemicals and fertilizers ministry. This could ensure a more strategic, focused and coherent approach. Currently, these ministries work at cross-purposes insofar as deepening of organic farming is concerned, as they have disparate objectives and conflicting mandates. While the department of fertilizers fixes annual targets for increasing the use of conventional chemical fertilizers, the agriculture ministry pushes for organic alternatives. The recent classification of nano urea as a 'nano fertilizer' by the ministry of agriculture (and not ministry of chemicals and fertilizers) points to turf overlaps. Similarly, the National Plan for Organic Productions, which also speaks of shifting to organic and bio-fertilizers, was published by the ministry of commerce and industry. This carries the risk of a policy gridlock. Moreover, lack of clarity on definitions and the absence of a robust certification system for organic fertilizers makes their adoption by farmers that much harder. A unified policy-making entity could do better in crafting and executing a roadmap that offers clear policy guidance on transitioning from conventional chemical to organic fertilizers, expanding domestic manufacturing capacities to achieve self-sufficiency in the latter, and educating our farmers on their proper use.

Retain food and fertilizer subsidies but redirect them towards organic fertilizers and millets

Odisha has made progress in organic farming. Through initiatives like the Odisha organic farming policy of 2018, the state has provided significant support, including financial assistance of ₹10 lakh for a 50-acre plot. It has spurred crop diversification via a rice-fallow management approach, wherein farmers cultivate short-duration pulses or nitrogen-fixing crops after their rice harvest. This approach has proven both eco-friendly and economically viable.

Channel food subsidies to millets: India's food subsidy bill, at roughly 1% of GDP, has been around ₹2 trillion, a trend seen since 2020 . A significant portion of this subsidy bill stems from the variance between the minimum support prices (MSPs) and the central issue prices (CIPs) of grains procured and distributed. MSPs for wheat and rice have historically witnessed steady increases. With CIPs remaining relatively stagnant, this variance has contributed to cost escalation. Our ever-increasing food subsidy bill was even raised as a concern by the Standing Committee on Food, Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution in 2017. The government's disproportionate emphasis on promoting wheat and rice through high MSPs has incentivized farmers to opt for environmentally unsustainable farming practices like mono-cropping.

In 2023, designated as the International Year of Millets, the spotlight was on the exceptional nutritional properties and unique agronomic characteristics of millets. We have an opportunity to direct our food subsidies to this more nutritious and less carbon-intensive alternative. Moreover, promoting millets promises to foster social equity, as Tribal communities and women farmers are likely to be key beneficiaries. Additionally, it can catalyse a transition towards a circular economy. Hence, we should explore a high-MSP regime for millets instead of rice and wheat.

In conclusion: While the government grapples with the challenge of striking a delicate balance between welfare, fiscal prudence and mitigating climate change, redirecting subsidies towards low-carbon alternatives such as organic fertilizers and millets while retaining their outlay levels would create a win-win for all sides.

These are the author's personal views.

THEIR VIEW

Ten reasons why Piketty's paper goes wrong on Indian inequality

His latest paper with three co-authors falls short on the data-driven rigour needed to make claims of increasing inequality



V. ANANTHA NAGESWARAN & DEEKSHA SUPYAAL BISHT
are, respectively, the chief economic advisor to the Government of India and an officer in the Indian Economic Service.

ISTOCKPHOTO



Recently, a working paper titled 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj,' by Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi was released. Sections of the Indian media lapped it up, forgetting that it is not a peer-reviewed paper; nor has it been published by any reputed journal. We present arguments here in the hope that it will leave readers better informed on inequality in India.

One, the authors have combined many different data sets and engaged in interpolations and extrapolations to arrive at their conclusions without reflecting much on the compatibility and consistency of data. Yet, it is surprising that, despite the availability of a new Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23, they ignore and relegate it to a footnote (No. 11). Readers can refer to our article (*alturl.com/8zm3g*) on it.

Two, for 2017-2022, the paper uses consumption data from the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which is not comparable with HCES data. The authors account for it by using 2017-18 HCES data from leaked reports that had serious quality issues. The International Labour Organization acknowledged, "In the model of labour force participation, the PLFS observations for 2018 and 2019 have been excluded as they appear to present limited comparability with both the previous NSS results and the newer PLFS results."

Three, the paper adjusts wealth distribution at the top end using Forbes' and Hurun's list data, which includes stock market wealth as a part of net worth. For venture capital (VC)-funded firms, non-market implied valuations are also considered. The top percentiles' rise in wealth is attributable to greater financialization of the Indian economy, a stock market boom and VC valuations. Before the market boom, owners of companies had their wealth measured in terms of book value. Listed companies did well and saw their market cap grow, which is a natural outcome to the extent that market cap is considered wealth (which is a debatable assumption). *Counterfactual*: If our stock market was not booming, or very few firms were listed, India's inequality under the paper's approach would have come down significantly. In other words, if all that stands between India and a more equal distribution of wealth and income is a stock market correction, then we can ask if inequality is such a serious issue and whether it is an appropriate measure of the welfare of people at the bottom of the country's income and wealth pyramid.

Four, if tax compliance has improved, then tax data will show higher income at higher ends not because income inequality has increased, but because of better compliance. On the other hand, for the pre-1990 or pre-2010 period (all the way back to 1920), taking tax tables to prove that the top 1% earned less than today assumes that tax compliance has been uniform throughout this period.

Five, various studies point to the progressivity of India's tax structure and fiscal policies, including Kundu and Cabrera ('Fiscal Policies and their Impact on Income Distribution in India', April 2022) and Datt, Ray and Teh ('Progressivity and redistributive effects of income taxes: evidence from India', October 2021). According to Kundu and Cabrera, fiscal transfers pertaining to health and education reduce the Gini coefficient (a measure of inequality) by 0.05 percentage points. Thus, the paper's findings of a regressive tax structure are contrary to existing literature.

Six, the paper, by singularly focusing on the top 1%, misses India's emerging middle class. According to Rajesh Shukla (2010), the Indian middle class doubled in size between 2001-02 and 2009-10, growing from 5.7% of all households in 2001-02 to 12.8% in 2009-10. As per recent estimates from PRICE , the middle class comprises nearly 31% of our population and is expected to rise to 61% by 2046-47.

Seven, while inequality is a relative concept, absolute poverty is a more urgent and tangible reality lived by millions of people. The Niti Aayog's 'National Multidimensional Poverty Index Report', 2022, shows a remarkable decline in multidimensional poverty in India, attributable in large part to the government's strategic focus on achieving universal access to basic amenities. The largest improvements were reported in states like Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Rajasthan, with rural areas leading the decline in poverty. India is on a path to achieving SDG Target 1.2, of reducing multidimensional poverty by at least half, well ahead of its 2030 deadline. For the average aspirational Indian, data showing that 248 million people escaped multidimensional poverty between 2013-14 and 2022-23 matters much more than the number of billionaires in the country. Reduction in poverty, not inequality, is the litmus test of inclusive growth.

Eight, a decline in inequality of consumption in India in the decade before the economic reforms of 1991 can be attributed to regulatory distortions and state interference that suppressed incentives for individual effort and innovation, leading to low levels of inequality but with high poverty incidence. Regardless of what the authors think, it is doubtful if those Indians who have emerged from poverty in recent decades would prefer to go back to their pre-1991 living standards.

Nine, it is a popular idea that redistribution is the solution to raising living standards at scale, alleviating poverty and inequality in one stroke. This approach has two major problems. Firstly, the infeasibility of taxing wealth is widely discussed in academic literature; for example, in 'Taxing our wealth,' Working Paper No. 28150, National Bureau of Economic Research, by Scheuer and Slemrod (2020), and in 'Not So Fast: The Hidden Difficulties of Taxing Wealth' by Fleischer (2017). Like many European countries , India did away with its wealth tax (in 2015), in line with Chelliah Committee (1993) and Kelkar Committee (2002) recommendations, while increasing income tax surcharges for top earners.

Ten, several authors have pointed out many incorrect claims made in Thomas Piketty's work. In 'Challenging the Empirical Contribution of Thomas Piketty's Capital in the 21st Century' (2014), for example, Magness and Murphy wrote, "We find evidence of pervasive errors of historical fact, opaque methodological choices, and the cherry-picking of sources to construct favourable patterns from ambiguous data."

In a recent paper (*alturl.com/83236*), 'Income Inequality in the United States: Using Tax Data to Measure Long-Term Trends' (*Journal of Political Economy*, No. 3, Volume 134, 2024), Auten and Splinter wrote that using US tax data correctly showed lower income shares for the top 1%, and that after-tax top income shares have changed little. This is in contrast with Piketty's findings on inequality in the US.

Further, in 'How Pronounced is the U-Curve? Revisiting Income Inequality in the United States, 1917–60' (March 2022), Geloso, Magness, Moore and Schlosser wrote that Piketty and Saez overstated inequality in the period between 1917 and 1980 in their 2003 paper.

Finally, in fairness to Piketty and his co-authors, we acknowledge a confession they made, even though they have tucked it away in a footnote (No. 36 to be precise). It reads: "Our results are tentative given we do not observe both income and wealth for the same set of individuals and instead draw inferences based on the full distributions of income and wealth we estimate." That is a QED moment. Now, if only they had put it right up front, we could have spared ourselves the tedium of ploughing through some 85 pages.

These are the authors' personal views. Deep Narayan Mukherjee and Karan Bhasin contributed to this article.

MINT CURATOR

China's clean-tech success isn't a win for a statist policy frame

Its leadership here is a story of capitalism rather than state props



DAVID FICKLING
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering energy and commodities.



The rise of Chinese green-tech does not look over-leveraged BLOOMBERG

There's a comforting but erroneous explanation for why solar panels, home batteries and electric vehicles (EVs) are increasingly likely to be made in China. With an economy awash in easy money, its renewable manufacturers are undercutting rivals across the world; ergo, China's comparative advantage isn't scale, cost efficiency or innovative prowess, but cheap government subsidies. In the EV industry "everybody has an endless supply of loans and support from the local government," the *Financial Times* quoted Jörg Wuttke, former president of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, as saying in a recent article. This theory provides a justification for trade restrictions. If Chinese manufacturers survive on government cash, there's no way overseas rivals can compete. Tariffs and other hurdles should keep out their products and give homegrown competitors a chance.

It's true that swathes of China's economy really do run this way. In the middle of the 2010s, all-but-forgotten Dalian Wanda, Anbang Insurance, HNA Group and Fosun went on a multi-billion-dollar shopping spree for foreign companies. The bursting of that bubble prompted another to inflate in real estate. Its bursting has hit property developers Evergrande, Country Garden Holdings and China Vanke. You can see the pattern in the published accounts of Fosun, which is divesting businesses amid a credit squeeze. It spent a net 112 billion yuan on acquisitions and other investments over the decade through June 2023, but generated 65 billion yuan in operating cashflows. Were it not for the 127 billion yuan in cash from financing, the vast majority of it debt, there is no way the company could have paid its bills.

The contrast with Berkshire Hathaway, the company that Fosun is most often compared to, could not be more stark. Warren Buffett's $341 billion of investments over the past decade were more than covered by the $384 billion in steady, predictable operating cash his businesses generated. Just $51 billion came from financing.

Is the same thing happening with clean technology? It doesn't look that way. If Chinese solar, wind, battery and EV makers are doing well because of easy credit, it should leave clear fingerprints on their financial statements. You can measure this by comparing their operating cash-flows to the average debt they held during the year: Where cash is low relative to debts, it's going to take a very long time to pay back creditors. Looking through a group of 145 renewable companies with at least $1 billion in annual revenues—77 of them Chinese—this is the result you get.

As you'd expect in a sector experiencing rapid growth, leverage is often relatively generous, but it doesn't look significantly higher among Chinese companies. Many of the most feared and aggressive renewable exporters, such as Longi Green Energy, Tongwei and JA Solar Technology have very low borrowings relative to their cashflows. Plenty have enough cash-flow to pay off 25% of their debts in the current year. This doesn't look like a sector being propped up by government loans, or indeed loans of any sort.

For the sake of comparison, let's look at an industry that was clearly a beneficiary of easy money: real estate. What's notable here is that long before the crisis hit, Chinese real estate companies already had markedly poorer coverage ratios than their global competitors. If you measure things in terms of the amount of time it would take for operating cash-flows to pay off total debts, the median Chinese renewable manufacturer comes in at just under 10 years, a fraction of the nearly 27 years in the data for real estate. Non-Chinese companies came in a little under eight years, regardless of which industry they were in:

To be sure, Chinese manufacturers still enjoy powerful advantages. Generous and consistent purchase support for EVs and solar panels gives owners confidence to invest aggressively, just as the same policies do in Europe and the US. The government remains fixated on keeping costs low: China is home to nearly half of the world's special economic zones (SEZs), whose advantages are cheap land, easy regulation and low taxation. It also offers reduced corporate tax rates for companies in new technology industries. Fundamentally, it's the biggest single market for clean technology, so domestic factories have scale advantages that rivals elsewhere can only dream of.

The problem for developed countries is that, when applied to their own economies, these measures are all supported as old-fashioned pro-business policies, rather than unfair mercantilism.

It would comfort the US if China's success in clean tech was a result of easy credit from a centrally-run communist state. In truth, though, this boom is a capitalist success story on a grand scale. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Arguments against deploying DPI don't really hold up

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and the author of 'The Third Way: India's Revolutionary Approach to Data Governance'. His X (formerly Twitter) handle is @matthan.

Last year saw tremendous enthusiasm around the concept of digital public infrastructure (DPI) during the G20 and after. What I didn't realize at the time was that lurking just beneath the surface were strong undercurrents of disapproval.

The arguments against DPI range from the semantic (that the term DPI flatters to deceive) to the techo-solutionist (not everything can be solved by throwing technology at it). These arguments have, in recent times, been raised with greater stridency. Before this narrative gains any further traction, I thought it best to address it head-on.

Most economists start with semantic concerns—the fact that what we call DPI is neither non-rivalrous nor non-excludable in the way that public goods ought to be. This, they argue is evidence of "green-washing"—i.e., an attempt to leverage the lustre of digital public goods (DPGs) even though DPI has none of its features.

That a given DPI is excludable is often a matter of choice. Many countries believe that it remains their sole prerogative (and sovereign right) to offer these services. And that no other person should be allowed to deploy DPI in their country. It is to address these concerns that the term DPI was coined in the first place. This is not an attempt to make DPI look more like DPGs, but an attempt to distinguish these solutions from them. As a matter of fact, most DPI solutions are also available in open-source modes, making them both non-rivalrous and non-excludable. MOSIP, an open-source digital identity system, is one such system currently being used by 17 countries and has already registered over 100 million people.

Then there is the argument that governments ought not be building technology solutions. Their job is to govern, so they should focus on doing that and leave the job of building technology to the private sector. This argument is based on an imperfect understanding of how DPI solutions are deployed. In almost every instance, governments aren't doing the actual building. All they do is prescribe protocols and leave it to the private sector to develop solutions. Not only does this ensure that we have a multiplicity of DPI solutions in a given sector, even though each is built by a different company, it makes sure they are all mutually consistent and aligned with stated national values. Private incentives rarely align with national goals, and unless we prescribe the protocols, these companies are incentivized to build solutions that benefit their private stakeholders.

Another allegation is that the DPI approach is just tech-solutionism—an attempt to throw technology at a problem in the hope of solving it. This is why, they argue, many solutions get built without first putting the necessary regulations in place. And why they don't, as a consequence, have legal authority.

Critics have opposed an idea that is better aligned with democratic principles than its alternatives

All DPI solutions incorporate legal principles directly into the design of the infrastructure—principles of individual autonomy, freedom of choice and open markets—that all participating entities must adhere to because they are baked directly into the protocols. This means that even in the absence of specific regulations, DPI solutions will conform to existing legal norms. Since they are modular, every new solution built on top of an existing DPI will inherit these values from the layers on which they are built, making these core legal principles hard to vary each time a new layer is added to the stack.

But by far the most common argument against DPI is that these digital systems are only popular because governments see them as new ways to watch over their people. Since most population-scale DPI projects are designed to process massive amounts of people's data, critics argue, they serve as technologies for surveillance.

This is yet another argument born out of a poor understanding of how these systems are built. DPI systems are designed to keep data federated—to ensure that data remains at the edges—and are only accessed when needed. Since data does not get concentrated in a single place, governments would struggle to use these systems for surveillance.

This argument, I have found, is often not, of itself, convincing. Repressive governments, critics say in response, will always find new ways to subvert this design to achieve their ends. Federated data alone will not stop a government that is hell-bent on using this data for surveillance.

This is true. Very little can stop a government that has its mind set on getting something done. But if such a government was on the look-out for an ideal digital surveillance system, a DPI solution is probably the worst option it could choose.

There is also the concern that DPI solutions built by a well-intentioned democratic government could be subverted by a repressive government that succeeds it. This, critics argue, is a reason not to build these systems in the first place.

However, since DPI systems are modular by design, the democratic principles embedded in the stack's foundational layers are increasingly difficult to unwind the more layers you add on. This makes the DPI approach an effective inoculation against an ill-motivated future administration.

Governments across the world have already committed vast sums of money to building digital governance models. Despite what sceptics and naysayers claim, of all the choices available to us, digital public infrastructure is probably the best aligned with democratic principles.

THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

CAPITALISM CANNOT SURVIVE WITHOUT A WORKING CLASS, WHILE THE WORKING CLASS CAN FLOURISH... WITHOUT CAPITALISM. — TERRY EAGLETON

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

A LOUD ABSTENTION

Israel's Netanyahu government can ill afford to ignore US message on Gaza ceasefire at UN vote

IT WAS AN abstention heard around the world — except, perhaps, where it matters most. On March 25, the US allowed the first UN Security Council Resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza to be passed 14-0. Since Israel began its retaliation after the October 7 attacks by Hamas, the US has vetoed three resolutions demanding a humanitarian ceasefire. Monday's resolution demanded both a ceasefire, allowing aid to reach Palestinian civilians, as well as the release of all remaining hostages in Hamas custody. Unfortunately, so far, rather than heed the advice and signals from its closest ally and other friends of Israel, the Benjamin Netanyahu government is painting the abstention and even tacit criticism of the humanitarian excesses in Gaza as a betrayal of Israel.

Critics of the US stand on Israel point to two factors. First, that given that the resolution is non-binding and the US continues to supply weapons and aid to Israel, it is little more than a rap on the knuckles. Second, that the gesture is merely meant to mollify the significant number of Democrat voters opposed to Israel's excesses in Gaza, ahead of the US presidential election. These criticisms, however, ignore the fact that Washington has been Israel's strongest supporter — and, in effect, a shield — in international fora and by far its staunchest ally. In addition, the UN vote has taken place in the broader context of increasing disagreements between US President Joe Biden and Netanyahu. Israel's PM has reacted sharply to the US vote and scrapped the visit to Washington of a senior Israeli delegation to discuss the proposed ground offensive in Rafah, which the US has opposed. Rafah has received over a million refugees from the rest of Gaza, and an attack here would be catastrophic for Palestinians, who are already in danger of suffering famine in addition to the other depredations of war — over 30,000 civilians have reportedly been killed, 13,000 of them children. Rather than respect Biden's stated "red line", that Israel must not engage in a ground offensive, Netanyahu has doubled down on his rhetoric. In fact, he has denied even the principle of a two-state solution. Such maximalist positions — both in terms of the current conflict and the broader Israel-Palestine issue — are untenable. They also harm Israel's long-term interests.

Before October 7, Israel was in a reasonable position vis a vis its neighbourhood and the broader international community — especially after the Abraham Accords that sought to normalise relations between Tel Aviv and several Arab states. Now, increasingly isolated, Israel's government must listen to its friends and pause hostilities. Otherwise, it will only bolster the view that its prime minister is placing his political interests above the national interest.

CALLING OUT MISOGYNY

Congress's Shrinate, BJP's Ghosh must know there is no excuse for crude sexism, no matter how bruising the electoral battle

AS THE LOK Sabha election draws closer, barbs traded between political opponents get sharper. Misogynistic remarks from senior leaders of the two major national parties are a reminder, however, that there can be no excuses for crude sexism. Following close on the heels of a deeply offensive post about actor Kangana Ranaut, the newly selected BJP candidate from Mandi, appearing on the social media accounts of Congress's national spokesperson and social media head, Supriya Shrinate, on Monday — "kya bhaav chal raha hai mandi mein..." (what is the going rate in the market?)" — came BJP leader Dilip Ghosh's extremely unseemly comments about West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, asking her to "identify her own father". Even as accusations and whataboutery fly back and forth, it is important that there is accountability, from individuals and parties. It is not enough to merely distance themselves from the incident, as Shrinate has attempted to do, by talking about a parody account and alleging that the post was made by someone else who had access — given her position in the Congress, this does not sound persuasive. A larger reckoning is called for on the part of Congress, and BJP, on the coarsening terms of political exchange.

These remarks betray a mindset that refuses to see what is evident to even the most casual observer — as women claim their rightful place in the public sphere, their empowerment is an irreversible force. Across economy and sports, art and culture, the growing presence of women, including in leadership roles, is a palpable and growing reality. In the electorate, the proportion of women voters is steadily increasing, outnumbering men in over 100 Lok Sabha constituencies, and this is forcing political parties, too, to take into account their growing aspirations, as through the demand for women's reservation in legislatures. But it has also triggered, at the same time, a denial and an unwillingness to recognise and respect the autonomy and dignity of women. This view continues to paint women either as passive beneficiaries to be wooed with schemes, or as people to be sexualised and humiliated. Cutting across party lines, this frequently manifests in crude comments, such as those put out by Congress's Shrinate and spoken by BJP's Ghosh.

In the bruising electoral battle that lies ahead, much will be said in the heat of the moment. Yet, parties must ensure that the battleground is not made any more hostile to women. India is moving with the times. Those who seek to represent its people must catch up.

TRAYS HELD ALOFT

Revival of Waiters' Race in Paris celebrates an unsung profession that has fallen on hard times

IN 1914 ON Bastille Day, waiters in Paris left their cafes and restaurants to participate in an eight-km long race. Sporting long aprons and jaunty bow ties that contrasted with crisp white shirts and shiny black shoes, they swerved and jostled while carrying, each, a wooden tray laden with a bottle and three glasses. Nothing could be spilled. Parisian cafés had by then built a formidable reputation, but the garcons (literally "boys") regularly earned bad press for being moody, and even rude. The event celebrated the dexterity required in running around with a tray in hand, while also remembering the orders of 10 patrons. In less than two decades, the idea crossed French boundaries and by the 1960s, this demonstration of the waiter's skills ceased to be a male preserve. In Scandinavia, the race takes place on cruise ships and on sandy beaches in Spain. There are Chinese, Australian and Argentinian versions as well. But in Paris, the lack of sponsors hurt the Course des Garçons de Café — it was in 2011 that the last such race took place.

As the French capital gets ready to host the Olympics, the city authorities are keen to showcase the bistros and cafés that are as integral to Paris's culture as the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower. On Sunday, 200 waiters slalomed the streets of Central Paris holding aloft trays loaded with croissants, coffee cups and glasses filled with water. As a concession to modern dressing habits, they were allowed to wear sneakers. With the dismissive garçon rarely used today, the race was rechristened Course des Cafés, or cafes race.

Like in most parts of the world, the post-Covid pandemic slump has pushed French eateries to do things differently. Many serve only takeaway orders. Working conditions are tougher than they earlier were for waiters. Parisian authorities have projected the revival of the iconic race as a sign of change. The question is: Will they keep up the commitment once the Olympics are over?

How Delhi talks to world

Indian government's foreign policy lexicon is becoming more self-assured. Opposition seems out of step



RAJA MANDALA

C RAJA MOHAN

ONE OF THE subtle but significant changes in the conduct of India's foreign policy over the last decade has been the evolution of its diplomatic vocabulary. However, that vocabulary has yet to filter down to the political class. The sharp political polarisation in the country delays the emergence of a new and widely accepted diplomatic lexicon that is necessary for India, which is rising on the global stage.

Even the limited attention to foreign policy in the election manifestos of political parties, especially in the Opposition, will hopefully reduce some of the gap between India's rise internationally and the nature of discourse at home on Delhi's new global role. Its subjective capacity to seize the new objective international possibilities will depend on recognising the positive change in its relative and absolute position in the international system. Prime Minister Narendra Modi frequently talks about India's emergence as the third-largest economy in the next few years. India is on course towards that goal.

There is little political gain for the Opposition in quibbling about this prospect and questioning the data. Instead of dissing "India's rise", an idea that enthuses large parts of society, the Opposition should take at least some credit for the transformation. Major political parties, including the regional ones, have, after all, been part of various coalition governments since 1991 that steered India on an upward trajectory. Yet, there is resistance in many quarters of the political class to thinking of India as a major power. In fact, many leaders and intellectuals insisted that India either cannot or should not become a major power. However, given the uneven pace at which different countries progress and the size of their populations, India's weight in the international system will continue to grow. What the Opposition could do is remind the nation that India will remain a distant third to the US and China and that there are gigantic tasks at hand to reduce that gap.

Years of self-perception as a weak and vulnerable nation constrained India's ambitions and constructed a diplomatic language that tended to be defensive, defiant and passive-aggressive. As Delhi recognises and responds to its changing position, India's foreign policy lexicon has begun to move towards greater self-assurance. In the all-consuming debate on the India-US nuclear deal in the mid-2000s, many had insisted that Delhi would lose its "strategic autonomy" if it moved closer to the US. Although India has not bought a single nuclear reactor from the US, Delhi is now closer than ever to Washington.

> Although the aggregate size of its economy gives India some critical attributes of a major power, its low per capita income underlines the massive developmental challenges at home. Becoming a developed country in the next 25 years raises questions about economic strategy, industrial policy, new technologies, inequality, environmental degradation, and a changing global order. Much of the political burden for this debate falls on the Congress and hence the significant interest in its election manifesto.

But as India's economy has grown, its diplomatic language has become ever more self-confident. While the new language of assertion enthrals many nationalists, others worry about Delhi emulating Beijing's counter-productive "wolf warrior diplomacy". How Delhi talks to the world has clearly changed — it is increasingly unabashed in its emphasis on national interests and global ambitions. It has avoided, so far, the dangers of looking too aggressive.

Thinking of India as the third-largest economy, which also has the third-largest armed force and the fourth-largest defence budget, does not square with the idea of "strategic autonomy". It is an idea inherited from the era of post-colonial insecurity and the persistent anxiety about being hustled into unwanted decisions by major powers. But when you are a major power in your own right, your autonomy inevitably expands. Even so, there is no such thing as "absolute strategic autonomy" — not even the US has total freedom of action.

India's growing aggregate power also brings greater responsibilities and opportunities to shape and maintain regional and global order. It demands a different diplomatic language. It is no surprise that references to "strategic autonomy" have declined over the last decade and been replaced by references to India as a "leading power", "Vishwa Mitra", "net security provider", "first responder" to regional crises, "minilateralism", "inter-operability", and "global public goods".

Yet, there is much distance to go. The big question today for the Indian political class is no longer about preserving autonomy but contributing effectively to securing the region and governing the world. Historically, great powers have shaped the nature of war and peace and international institutions to limit the former and promote the latter. Great powers also set the rules for international commerce, manage global commons, regulate new technologies and manage their consequences. An even more important opportunity comes from a higher position in the international hierarchy. It is about leveraging India's growing weight internationally for greater security and prosperity for its citizens.

Strategic autonomy was never about setting goals; it was about abstract claims on retaining freedom of action. Once you are a power of reasonable size with assured autonomy, you must set concrete goals and objectives. For too long, the pursuit of strategic autonomy seemed to become an end in itself. That prevented the Indian political classes from articulating specific external goals. Successive governments in the 21st century have talked about developing and publishing a "national security strategy". Yet, the tradition of avoiding a definitive analysis of the international situation and identifying India's goals and policies has prevailed.

To its credit, the Modi government has set one important goal — making India a developed nation by 2047. Rather than carping at this exuberance, the Opposition must press for a debate on the best pathways to that goal. After all, India's per capita income today is less than $3000, quadrupling it to $12,000 by 2047 is both inspiring and intimidating. That also brings us to the real paradox of India's power. Although the aggregate size of its economy gives India some critical attributes of a major power, its low per capita income underlines the massive developmental challenges at home. Becoming a developed country in the next 25 years raises questions about economic strategy, industrial policy, new technologies, inequality, environmental degradation, and a changing global order.

Much of the political burden for this debate falls on the Congress and hence the significant interest in its election manifesto. There was a time, when the foreign policy resolutions of annual AICC sessions set the terms for domestic discourse on foreign policy. As India's domestic and external imperatives become more intertwined, the Congress must rise to the occasion.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express *and a visiting research professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore*

PRINCE WHO BECAME A DIPLOMAT

Shahryar Khan tried to build bridges between India and Pakistan



VIVEK KATJU

FORMER PAKISTAN FOREIGN secretary Shahryar Khan, who passed away in Lahore on March 23, was perhaps the last of the Pakistani diplomats and civil and military officials who belonged to, or had strong ties with, the families of the erstwhile princely states of India. Others who come to mind are Sahabzada Yaqub Khan and Sultan Muhammed Khan.

Shahryar Khan's father was Sarwar Ali Khan, the Nawab of Kurwai, a small state in what is now Madhya Pradesh. His mother, and the dominant figure in his life, was Abida Sultan, the eldest daughter of the Nawab of Bhopal, Hamidullah Khan. These princely connections provided the potential to gain high-level social and political access in India and Shahryar Khan tried to build bridges between India-Pakistan.

Hamidullah Khan was an admirer of Jinnah and was loath to merge Bhopal with the Indian Union. Indeed, Bhopal merged with the Union only in 1949. Sarwar Ali Khan and Abida Sultan's marriage did not last. In 1950, Abida Sultan along with her only child, Shahryar, moved to Pakistan. Sarwar Khan remained in India. Shahryar Khan largely associated himself with Bhopal and his mother's family.

Hamidullah Khan died in 1960 and was succeeded by his second daughter, Sajida Sultan, married to the Nawab of Pataudi, Iftikhar Ali Khan, who had the distinction of playing Test cricket for England and India. Shahryar, like his uncle, and cousin Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, was passionate about the game and became President of the Pakistan Cricket Association after his retirement.

> The second issue, related to the period August 1990-March 1994, is significant from the standpoint of India-Pakistan ties. It was a time when Pakistan went all out to promote terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. While it is true that Pakistan's India policy is controlled by its army, what is not clear is the advice Shahryar Khan gave to the generals and the political leadership.

After his mother went to Pakistan, Shahryar did his schooling and university in England. Earlier in India, he had studied at the Royal Indian Military Academy School in Dehradun and later at Daly College in Indore. Returning to Pakistan he competed successfully for the civil services examination and joined the Pakistan Foreign Service in 1957. He served in Pakistani missions in London and the Arab world and as he rose up the diplomatic ranks, he became Pakistan's ambassador to Jordan and later to the UK in 1987-1990. Clearly, he was held in high esteem. After the conclusion of his London assignment, he was appointed foreign secretary in August 1990 and held that position till March 1994.

Two points have to be made about the period of Shahryar Khan's foreign secretaryship. The first is that for a major part he served when Nawaz Sharif was Prime Minister, but after Benazir Bhutto won the 1993 elections, Shahryar Khan continued to remain in office for another five months till his retirement. Incidentally, his replacement Najmuddin Shaikh too had an Indian connection. His ancestor was a brother of the veteran Congress leader Acharya J B Kripalani who had converted to Islam.

The second issue, related to the period August 1990-March 1994, is significant from the standpoint of India-Pakistan ties. It was a time when Pakistan went all out to promote terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. While it is true that Pakistan's India policy is controlled by its army, what is not clear is the advice Shahryar Khan gave to the generals and the political leadership. Did he, for instance, have an instinctive understanding of this country's resilience and counsel his superiors that the path Pakistan had embarked on would prove counterproductive?

After his formal retirement, Khan led a productive life. He became Pakistan's ambassador to France, the UN secretary general's representative to Rwanda during the civil war, an author — his publications included a book on the history of the Bhopal state — and a cricket administrator. He was also entrusted by the Pakistani government to be a back-channel negotiator with India. He visited India in 2014, after that exercise had ended, to advocate its renewal and to underline Nawaz Sharif's commitment to good relations between India and Pakistan. Shahryar Khan led a full life in which he displayed the urbane sophistication which defined the culture of the Indian subcontinent in a time that is now no more.

The writer is a former diplomat


INDIAN EXPRESS

Talks to end port strike fail to make headway

ONLY 4 DAYS LEFT

ASIAD SPORTS

100

MARCH 27, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

PORT STRIKE TALKS

AFTER TWO ROUNDS of talks, the government and leaders of the striking port and dock workers failed to arrive at a settlement to end the 10-day protest. With both sides sticking to their basic positions, hopes of an early breakthrough in the talks have been belied. The two sides have, however, not given up hope as the talks will be resumed soon.

CONFUSION OVER FERA

THE FINANCE MINISTRY has pulled up the Enforcement Directorate for misinterpreting the provisions of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act — seven years after the directorate penalised an author for publishing his book abroad without permission from the RBI. The ministry stated that Section 27 of the FERA covers only continuing commercial agreements and does not encompass book publications which are one-time operations.

ERSHAD'S PLEA

THE BANGLADESH PRESIDENT, Lt Gen H M Ershad, sought the cooperation of the opposition political parties in ending martial law and returning the country to democracy. "It is not unusual to have a difference of opinion, but it is my firm belief that any political problem can be solved through goodwill and understanding, Gen Ershad said, addressing the nation on the eve of the country's independence.

NO TOPPLING STATES

CONGRESS (I) HAS finally called to halt all moves to topple the non-Congress (I) governments unless an extraordinarily serious situation develops in a state. This was conveyed to party leaders from the non-Congress (I) states in the course of their separate meetings with Mrs Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi. Recently, some Jammu and Kashmir leaders again pressed their case but were told to strengthen the organisation instead.

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Those who treated Catherine's illness as a voyeuristic guessing game should be ashamed... Most of us have no idea what it would be like to have such personal information so widely shared. Despite her global celebrity, Catherine is entitled to privacy regarding her health."
— THE GUARDIAN

The devil is in the footnote

Recent claims on inequality trends in India are based on a set of questionable assumptions. They warrant closer scrutiny



SURJIT S BHALLA AND KARAN BHASIN



C R Sasikumar

SELDOM DOES ONE come across footnotes that discredit an entire academic paper, particularly one written by distinguished economists like Thomas Piketty. The footnote reproduced below is from a recent paper issued by the World Inequality Lab, 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj' (Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty and Anmol Somanchi, hereafter BCPS).

"Our results are *tentative* given we do *not observe* both income and wealth for the same set of individuals and instead draw *inferences* based on the full distributions of income and wealth we *estimate*."(Footnote 36, page 24, emphasis added).

Estimating the distribution of income is a tricky business, especially for those countries that do not have an official income survey. One of us (Bhalla) was a member of India's first statistical commission (2006-2009) under the chairmanship of the late Suresh Tendulkar. He pleaded with the commission that India should conduct an income distribution survey. So far, India has not conducted such a survey, though it is hoped that after BCPS's shocking analysis (documented below), India will do so and thus diminish the need for imaginary declarations as contained in the footnote above.

It is well recognised that even official income distribution surveys can be an inaccurate reflection of the "actual true unobserved" income distribution. Not all households are covered by survey schedules, and the billionaire rich are almost never covered in any survey that we know of, anywhere in the world. Hence, the original important contribution by Piketty and his colleagues at the World Inequality Lab (WIL) was to merge tax and non-survey information with survey data in order that a better guesstimate of income distribution could be arrived at.

There are many indices of inequality but what Piketty and the WIL have popularised is the share in income of the top X per cent of the population — and their preferred X is the top 1 per cent (for the technically inclined, the share of the 100th percentile). But, making an original contribution does not give one a license to literally kill the "original" survey data.

Let us explain. In a popular article in a refereed journal World Bank Economic Review (2005), Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee and Thomas Piketty diagnosed the Indian distribution for the years 1922-2000 and reached the conclusion that in 1999 the top 1 per cent's share in the Indian income was just 9 per cent.

Thirteen years later in 2018, Chancel and Piketty updated their analysis of inequality in India to 2015 and took the opportunity to increase the share of the top 1 per cent in 1999 to 14.7 per cent. That is a 63 per cent increase in the share for the same year 19 years earlier. All data go through revisions, but survey data does not and neither does tax data show such large revisions — maybe a minuscule one to two percentage points.

Remember, in a democracy, the ruling party is answerable to Parliament and the press for any estimates. Sadly, economists making conjectural revisions of such high magnitudes are answerable to none. As documented and discussed in two articles ('Piketty has got it wrong', *IE*, January 20, 2018, and 'Inequality, myth, and reality', August 11, 2018) Bhalla had asked as to the source of the data and the data itself for the basis of these upward revisions. No response was forthcoming from the authors.

Now, six years later and coincidentally around election time, the Chancel-Piketty team has been joined by two additional authors, Nitin Bharti and Anmol Somanchi, and the analysis has been extended by seven more years to 2022. Now, 25 years later, the 1999 estimate of the share of the top 1 per cent has been inflated to read 21 per cent. Hence, the original Banerjee-Piketty 1999 estimate of 9 per cent has been revised to 21 per cent. It is an interesting question as to whether at any time in world economic history has any past estimate been revised upward by 133 per cent in 19 years (2005 to 2024) or at a compound annual growth rate of 4.5 per cent a year.

As the introductory footnote explicitly states, the authors estimate a distribution on unobserved data and get a ladder increase in inequality estimates for many years earlier with each update of new information for later years. If these estimated distributions are incorrect, then so are the results. A conclusion derived from a set of questionable assumptions must be robust enough to hold steady even as some of the assumptions are violated. This is not the case with the Piketty et al method. For example, Piketty led WIL's prior work on inequality in the US and claimed a large increase in post-tax income shares of the top 1 per cent between 1960 (magic 9 per cent again) to 15 per cent in 2019. Over the last decade, these results have begun to be questioned. Gerald Auten and David Splinter argue in a recent article 'Income Inequality in the United States: Using Tax Data to Measure Long-Term Trends' (forthcoming, *Journal of Political Economy*) that there has hardly been any change in post-tax share of the top 1 per cent for the last 60 years — the share has stayed constant at approximately 8-9 per cent even though the pre-tax share has substantially increased. Remember, that Piketty et al concentrate on inequality post-tax.

Geloso, Magnes, Moore and Schlosser (2022) conclude that Piketty "overstates inequality levels". In a slightly older paper, Magnes and Murphy (2014) found evidence of "pervasive errors", "opaque methodological choices" and "cherry-picking of sources to construct favourable patterns from ambiguous data".

The US represents a much richer information environment with a plethora of data on income and wealth, especially relative to an emerging market economy like India. If the WIL makes errors in an information-rich environment, then how accurate can their estimates be in a more data-constrained environment? Speculating and estimating a distribution conforming to your priors is not economic analysis, robust or otherwise. More dangerous and unfortunate is to make policy recommendations based on dodgy statistics derived from questionable methodological assumptions.

For example, the authors continue with the same 75-year-old foreign conclusion of the impending breakup of India and piously conclude: "The 'Billionaire Raj' headed by India's modern bourgeoisie is now more unequal than the British Raj headed by the colonialist forces... It is unclear how long such inequality levels can sustain without major social and political upheaval." They dig further and deeper into their self-constructed hole by recommending "implementing a super tax on Indian billionaires and multimillionaires, along with restructuring the tax schedule to include both income and wealth, so as to finance major investments in education, health and other public infrastructure". Major investments are based on real data, not on upgraded and inflated estimates of distributions.

It is surprising that not many in India have tried to look under the hood as they take the BCPS conclusions at face value. Perhaps, it is easy to accept conclusions when they conform to one's prior beliefs. But this is precisely when a good analyst must question the path taken to arrive at such conclusions. The world would be a better place, and so would policy discourse if more attention was devoted to important questions rather than to engagement with assumed distributions and motivated conclusions.

Bhalla is an independent researcher and Bhasin is a New York-based researcher. Views are personal

As the introductory footnote explicitly states, the authors estimate a distribution on unobserved data and get a ladder increase in inequality estimates for many years earlier with each update of new information for later years. If these estimated distributions are incorrect, then so are the results. A conclusion derived from a set of questionable assumptions must be robust enough to hold steady even as some of the assumptions are violated. This is not the case with the Piketty et al method.

Hindutva, music and the elite

Sad that a mature debate on making Carnatic music less Brahmin-centric has become a spat between equally brilliant musicians



RAMESH VENKATARAMAN

AS THE STORM engendered in the "ever-silver" coffee tumblers of Chennai's Brahmin circles by the Music Academy's designation of T M Krishna as its Sangita Kalanidhi for 2024 dies down, let me start with some air-clearing positives.

First, the controversy was not about musicianship. Not even his most vicious critics would deny that Krishna (along with Sanjay Subrahmanyan) is one of the two finest Carnatic male vocalists of this generation. Krishna's concerts are a profound experience: Simultaneously, a dazzling demonstration of technical virtuosity and of the human voice's sublime ability to touch the deepest emotional chords. In fact, to many aficionados, Krishna's Sangita Kalanidhi award is perhaps a decade overdue.

Second, kudos to the Music Academy, the *de facto* hub of the Carnatic music universe and oft-criticised for its sniffy elitism, for being brave enough to choose as its awardee someone who has repeatedly cocked a snook at the current dispensation in Delhi and their ideology of Hindutva. What this year's award unequivocally declares is that it doesn't matter what Krishna's political and social views are, he is inarguably a brilliant exemplar of Carnatic music as a singer, innovator, and inclusive performer.

In the current climate where everyone from public bodies to academic institutions, private sector corporations, and the media kowtows to the Modi establishment, it is refreshing to see an institution that stays focused on its core mission — of upholding excellence in the south Indian classical tradition — and ignores the political ramifications.

Third, Carnatic music fans are not going to suffer because of the boycott of the Music Academy's annual conference by the top musicians upset over its recognition of Krishna. While the Music Academy is its most prestigious venue, Chennai's Margazhi Festival extends well beyond it to scores of locales across the city. Ranjani and Gayatri, Ravikiran, and the Trichur Brothers (to name Krishna's most prominent musician critics) will all undoubtedly perform in the 2024 "season" at many of these other *sabha*s, more accessible and less stuffy than the Music Academy where the prime seats in the front section are hogged by "members," mostly denizens of Chennai's Brahmin elite.

Meanwhile, as Sangita Kalanidhi, Krishna will not only preside over the Music Academy's December conference, but will himself sing on one of the evenings, a huge bonus for fans who have been denied a Krishna concert in Chennai since 2015 when he withdrew to protest the Carnatic world's Brahmin domination.

The anger against Krishna ostensibly stems from his "woke" anti-Brahminism (despite himself being a Brahmin) and endorsement of the influential social reformer and founder of the Dravidian movement, E V Ramasamy "Periyar", his castigation of the Carnatic realm for its Brahmin-centric elitism, and his supposed denigration of revered Carnatic icons — the composer Thyagaraja and the vocalist M S Subbulakshmi.

However, underlying this controversy is the politics of Hindutva. While aggressive majoritarianism has had little overall purchase in Tamil Nadu, the RSS and BJP have won over a section of the Tamil Brahmin community still smarting from the disparagement and erosion of the socioeconomic position it suffered under the Dravidian parties who have ruled Tamil Nadu since the late 1960s. The content of the attacks against the Music Academy and Krishna suggests that the musicians involved (all Tamil Brahmins) are partial to at least "soft" Hindutva.

Krishna, on the other hand, exemplifies a progressive and inclusive stream that is also found in the same Brahmin community. More than a century ago, the revered Tamil poet, Subramania Bharathi, composed the still-popular Carnatic songs espousing caste and gender equality, and his 19th century namesake Gopalakrishna Bharathi wrote an entire Carnatic opera celebrating Nandanar, the Dalit Saiva Nayanar bard-saint, excerpts from which figure prominently in concerts even today.

Carnatic has long embraced Muslim and Christian musicians and featured devotional compositions to Jesus. Carnatic's progressive and inclusive tradition sits squarely within its strong Hindu devotionalism. Krishna's public opposition to the Ayodhya Ram Mandir draws on Vedanta and *bhakti* theology and practice. And no one who has heard his moving rendition of the 15th century composer Vyasatirtha's "Krishna Nee Begane Baro" can seriously doubt that he is anything but immersed in *bhakti*.

As in every other Indian cultural and social sphere, it was inevitable that Hindutva politics would enter the arena of Carnatic music, more so given its ethos of Hindu religiosity. What is sad though is that the clash with Carnatic's strong progressive tradition rather than giving rise to a mature debate, for instance, on making Carnatic less Brahmin-centric, has descended to a vituperative wrangle between equally brilliant musicians.

The Krishna controversy underlines that even elite, educated Indians find it difficult to engage in civil exchanges over "sacred cows". We tend to regard our traditional institutions as flawless and our heroes — be it Thyagaraja or Periyar — as semi-divinities and are unable to countenance any criticism of them, however fact-based and nuanced. For all his pioneering reform credentials, Periyar's diatribes against Brahmins arguably cross the line into fostering hatred against a particular community.

Equally, while Tamil society and the Carnatic world have come a long way in eliminating casteism thanks, in part, to Periyar-inspired reforms, subtle and overt discrimination persists in many economic and cultural spheres.

Anyone who is familiar with the Upanishads or first millennium CE theologians such as Sankara and Ramanuja or the medieval poet-saints from the Alvars and Nayanars to Basava and Mahadevi Akka to Kabir and the Varkaris will know that dissent from established wisdom and social mores is integral to the history of Hinduism and its reform. To "deplatform" criticism and challenge is profoundly anti-Hindu. Both Krishna and his critics should remember this.

The writer is a private equity investor and Carnatic music enthusiast

Don't blame it on wokeness

It isn't social awareness but realisation of power imbalance that leads to depression



MANJIRI INDURKAR

THE 2015-16 NATIONAL Mental Health Survey of India revealed that one out of every 20 Indians was depressed, which means that over five per cent of Indians are struggling with depression. Given the systemic shame associated with this illness, the disparity in access to mental health treatments, awareness, and the sheer imbalance of the number of patients versus healthcare professionals, it won't be wrong to assume that even in 2015, the number was much higher than recorded. And if so, then today, in 2024, the situation is much worse.

This problem, however, isn't limited to India. There is a rise in depression and allied mental illnesses globally. While there are several reasons behind this epidemic, a new study posits social awareness could be a leading cause of depression among those "woke".

Let me begin by saying that I take offence to the term woke, and the idea of bracketing people from all classes, castes, and socioeconomic brackets under one small umbrella category of "wokeness". It comes across as a reductive term mostly used for and by the perpetually online.

That said, there is merit in examining how social awareness impacts our mental health. A good place to begin would be home. My mental health journey began much before I realised there were things such as depression, anxiety or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). All things I struggle with. I come from a seemingly "normal" family with loving parents. Yet I have a deep mistrust of the world. My child sexual abuse trauma, about which I have written in detail, naturally is a culprit. It certainly made me vulnerable to the curse of depression.

But I worked through that trauma; I processed it. Yet, the depression lurks — waiting to make a return. Most recently, in a conversation with my mother, she brought up the impending elections. She asked me to consider not returning home to cast my vote. It would be better for your mental peace — she doesn't use the word depression — if you stayed away from this chaos.

My mother, who once threw away Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* because it was making me, in her words, sad, knows that I respond rather adversely to social stimuli.

In Ernest Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden*, an unnamed character says, "Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know." And while blowing one's own trumpet isn't the best of traits, I believe that my intelligence and my ability to empathise make me vulnerable to the world around me and its conflicts.

I remember feeling agitated when someone in my small town talked about wanting a "fair girl" to marry their son. I remember slipping into despair when the boys I was friends with talked about girls they liked and the ones they felt repulsed by as a "joke". I remember crying while watching scenes of police violence in Jamia Millia Islamia in 2019. And I remember experiencing panic attacks when the MeToo movement was at its peak.

These are big and small events that affected my mental health. But where does this impact stem from? Is it fear? Is it helplessness? Is it the devastating idea of living in a world where each day moves away from any semblance of humanity? It perhaps is all these things.

Being aware of the things happening around you indeed affects you. But it's the rare amalgamation of life events, including but not limited to how you were brought up, the ideas you were exposed to, the books you read, the films you watched, the friends you made, and the lovers you encountered that shape you. There is also the awareness your privilege afforded you, the access you had to safe spaces, and the more conversations you were encouraged to have that have made way for empathy, rage, and care.

Simply put, the less homogenous the group of people you meet, the more wide your worldview. A problem I have often had with the privatisation of education hinges on this very idea that such spaces, while "safe", don't have any room for dissent or even a different worldview. It is people of a certain caste and class sharing a classroom — and then it doesn't matter which philosopher you read. But the role of education is also to make you uncomfortable in your skin. Only then is empathy possible.

To return to the point of the study on "woke" people, I reject the assertion that social awareness is causing depression. When in fact, it is the realisation that there is a power imbalance in the world. It is well-known that unequal societies have a higher percentage of depressed people. But when I look at these studies that point towards economic disparity as a cause of depression in the West, I understand that, but I also know that income disparity, even in countries such as America, is tied to the ideas of race, gender, and sexuality. When you look at the global south, especially India, you have an exhausting cornucopia of caste, sub-caste, religion, gender, sexuality, and then class.

That political awareness can make a person clinically depressed is only viable if that person can look at the one suffering through the lens of humanity. This is why some people can murder for the wrong kind of meat, while someone else can protest against such killings. And feel the pain of depression and anxiety when they cannot change the social reality of the world.

Indurkar is a writer, editor, and poet from Jabalpur. She is the author of It's All in Your Head, M

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INEQUALITY REPORT

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The unlevel field' (IE, March 25). The World Inequality Lab's findings suggest that economic inequality in India has given rise to the "Billionaire Raj" in India. The Modi government could dismiss this report as a canard and take solace from economists Surjit Bhalla and Karan Bhasin's report that India has registered an unprecedented decline in both urban and rural inequality between 2011-12 and 2022-23. Nonetheless, 80 crore Indians remain dependent on the government's free ration. And there is yet another case to be made about caste inequality in economic terms at a time when the caste census has become a major political issue.

L R Murmu, *New Delhi*

NOT OUR CRUSADER

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Opposition-mukt election?' (IE, March 25). The arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal just before the general elections has serious ramifications for the ruling BJP. It has triggered universal condemnation and occurred nearly simultaneously with the unfolding of the electoral bonds scandal before the very people who had previously believed PM Modi to be an anti-corruption crusader. That reputation is tarnished due to the many revelations regarding quid pro quo deals cobbled between his administration and bond donors. The opposition is now armed with a potent arsenal to attack Modi. Nevertheless, if Modi can win a third term by repressing the Opposition, that will just be a sham victory.

Kamal Laddha, *Bengaluru*

KEJRIWAL'S FATE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'How AAP lost its way' (IE, March 25). There is a similarity between cricket and politics — like cricket, in politics too, leadership has to be groomed and is a continuous process. If Arvind Kejriwal has not groomed the second rung of leadership, then he only has himself to blame. Like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Jayalalithaa, Kejriwal should have resigned after his arrest and taken a moral high ground, but that was not to be. Winning 62 out of 70 seats in Delhi in 2020 and 92 out of 117 seats in Punjab in 2022 was no mean achievement for AAP. What an irony that someone who has emerged from Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement himself has been found to indulge in corruption.

Bal Govind, *Noida*

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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to **explained@indianexpress.com**

ICCC: farm data dashboard for customised solutions

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

EARLIER THIS month, Agriculture Minister Arjun Munda inaugurated a Krishi Integrated Command and Control Centre (ICCC) set up at Krishi Bhavan in New Delhi, a big-screen dashboard of all digital innovations in the sector. Officials described the ICCC as a "significant leap forward" in leveraging technology for the advancement of agricultural practices.

What is the Krishi ICCC?

The ICCC is a tech-based solution involving multiple IT applications and platforms, which is designed to help in making informed decisions. The centre is housed in the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, which is responsible for legislation, policy formation, and implementation of initiatives in the agriculture sector.

The ICCC uses state of the art technologies such as artificial intelligence, remote sensing, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to collect and process large amounts of granular data — on temperatures, rainfall, wind speed, crop yields and production estimations — and presents it in graphical format.

What do you get as the visual output?

On eight large, 55-inch LED screens installed at the ICCC, you can see information on crop yields, production, drought situation, cropping patterns (geographic region-wise and year-wise) in map, timeline, and drill-down views.

EXPLAINED POLICY

You can also see the relevant trends (periodic and non-periodic), outliers, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and receive insights, alerts, and feedback on agriculture schemes, programmes, projects, and initiatives.

The ICCC uses platforms including the Krishi Decision Support System (DSS) to collect micro-level data, process it, and present the macro picture.

The ICCC has a contact centre and a helpdesk facility, with the operator's handset capable of being converted into a call centre. If needed, farmer beneficiaries can interact directly with officials or the Minister through video conferencing facilities.

What is the objective of the ICCC?

The ICCC will enable comprehensive monitoring of the farm sector by making available at one place geospatial information received from multiple sources, including remote sensing; plot-level data received through soil survey; weather data from the India Meteorological Department (IMD); sowing data from Digital Crop Survey; farmer- and farm-related data from Krishi MApper, an application for geo-fencing and geo-tagging of land; market intelligence information from the Unified Portal for Agricultural Statistics (UPAg); and yield estimation data from the General Crop Estimation Survey (GCES).

The integrated visualisation of the data will enable quick and efficient decision-making. The ICCC ecosystem can be linked with the PM-Kisan chatbot going forward.

Can the command and control centre generate individual farmer-specific advisories?

Going forward, the ICCC can create an ecosystem based on which individual farmer-level advisories can be generated through apps like Kisan e-mitra, a chatbot developed for PM-Kisan beneficiaries.

The AI-/ machine learning-based system will identify a farmer through his/ her mobile number or Aadhaar, and match it with the farmer's field information obtain through land records, historical crop sowing information from the crop registry, weather data from IMD, etc.

It will then generate a customised advisory in the local language of the farmer. For this, the system will use the Bhashini platform that allows translation into several Indian languages.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

FARMER'S ADVISORY: The ICCC allows visualisation of GIS based soil carbon mapping as well as soil health card data for a particular district together at one place. "This, when visualised with weather-related data from IMD for the selected district, will allow a customised and authentic advisory to be sent to the farmer about the type of crops that can be grown, and water and fertiliser requirements," an official said.

DROUGHT ACTIONS: Officials said increase or decrease in yield from a specific region (as per GCES data) can be correlated with weather, rainfall, and other information visualised through the Drought Portal, enabling the administration to understand the reason for increase/ decrease in yield and to take decisions proactively.

CROP DIVERSIFICATION: An analysis of crop diversification maps, together with field variability for paddy, will enable decision-makers identify areas with scope for diversified cropping.

FARM DATA REPOSITORY: Krishi Decision Support System (K-DSS), a platform under development, will act as an agriculture data repository. Integrated spatial and non-spatial data will be superimposed as a layer on the GIS map, and various AI/ ML models would be run on the data. The K-DSS will help in evidence-based, efficient, decision-making, and help prepare customised advisories.

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

WHERE DID HOMO SAPIENS GO AFTER AFRICA? NEW STUDY HAS AN ANSWER

OUR SPECIES emerged in Africa more than 300,000 years ago, with a migration out of the continent 60,000 to 70,000 years ago heralding the start of the global spread of Homo sapiens. But where did these pioneers go after leaving Africa?



Pebdeh Cave in Iran was occupied by hunter-gatherers 42,000 years ago. *Reuters*

What did the study find?

According to a new study, these bands of hunter-gatherers appear to have lingered for thousands of years as a homogeneous population in a geographic hub that spanned Iran, southeast Iraq, and northeast Saudi Arabia before going on to settle all of Asia and Europe starting roughly 45,000 years ago, scientists said on Monday.

The study has found that this region would have represented an ideal habitat. The researchers called the region, part of what is called the Persian Plateau, a "hub" for these people — who numbered perhaps only in the thousands — before they continued onward millennia later to more distant locales.

"Our results provide the first full picture of the whereabouts of the ancestors of all present-day non-Africans in the early phases on the colonisation of Eurasia," said molecular anthropologist Luca Pagani of the University of Padova in Italy, senior author of the study published in the journal *Nature Communications*.

These people lived in small, mobile bands of hunter-gatherers, the researchers said. The hub location offered a variety of ecological settings, from forests to grasslands and savannahs, fluctuating over time between arid and wet intervals.

There would have been ample resources available, with evidence showing the hunting of wild gazelle, sheep and goat, according to Anthropologist and study co-author Michael Petraglia, director of the Australian Research Centre for Human Evolution at Griffith University, Australia.

"Their diet would have been composed of edible plants and small- to large-sized game. Hunter-gatherer groups seemed to have practised a seasonal lifestyle, living in the lowlands in the cooler months and in the mountainous regions in the warmer months," Petraglia said.

The people inhabiting the hub at the time apparently had dark skin and dark hair, perhaps resembling the Gumuz or Anuak people now living in parts of East Africa, Pagani said.

"Cave art simultaneously appeared as soon as people left the hub. So these cultural achievements might have been brewed while in the hub," Pagani said.

Their eventual dispersal in different directions beyond the hub set the basis for the genetic divergence between present-day East Asians and Europeans.

How was the study carried out?

The study tapped into modern and ancient genomic data for European and Asian people.

"We found particularly useful the oldest genomes, dating from 45,000 to 35,000 years ago," said molecular anthropologist and study lead author Leonardo Vallini of the University of Padova and the University of Mainz in Germany.

REUTERS



EXPLAINED CLIMATE

Footing the climate action bill

In 2009, developed countries committed to raising $100 bn annually for climate action. They have not done so, and ahead of COP29 in Baku in November, negotiators are working on a new climate finance budget



AMITABH SINHA

THE 2022 climate change conference in Sharm el-Sheikh decided to set up a Loss and Damage Fund to help developing countries recover from climate disasters.

The Dubai conference last year was all about Global Stocktake, or GST, a review of ongoing climate action, which resulted in the first ever explicit acknowledgment of the need to "transition away" from fossil fuels, and a promise to triple global renewable energy capacity by 2030.

This year, the focus is on finance. The expression that is likely to be heard most frequently in climate conversations and at COP29, scheduled for November 11-24 in Baku, Azerbaijan, is NCQG — or New Collective Quantitative Goal (on finance).

What is NCQG?

NCQG is a convoluted way to describe the new amount that must be mobilised by developed countries every year from 2025 onward to finance climate action in developing countries. This new amount has to be higher than the $100 billion that developed countries, collectively, had promised to raise every year from 2020, but had failed to deliver.

NCQG is extremely important for developing countries, and discussions on this new amount have been ongoing for a couple of years at least. At a two-day meeting that concluded in Copenhagen, Denmark, on March 22 — the first minister-level climate meeting for this year — some technical work to arrive at the NCQG was finalised.

How much money is required to ensure effective climate action?

It has been clear for some time now that the biggest hurdle to a significant scale-up in global climate action is the unavailability of adequate finance, especially in developing countries. The scale of annual climate finance flows has always been considerably less than the $100 billion that the developed countries had promised to mobilise every year from 2020 onward. But even if that amount were being made available, it would be only a small fraction of the money that is required to enable actions that would keep the world on the 1.5 degree Celsius pathway at least until 2030.

Assessments of current financial requirements run into several trillions of dollars every year.

In 2021, UN Climate Change, the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), said in a report that developing countries would require a total of about $6 trillion annually between then and 2030 just to implement their climate action plans.

An updated version of that report is supposed to come out later this year, and is expected to raise this figure much higher.

The final agreement at Sharm el-Sheikh included some estimates of the scale of financial requirements. It said that a global transition to a low-carbon economy would likely require about $4-6 trillion every year until 2050. Ensuring a tripling of renewable energy capacity, as agreed in Dubai, is estimated to cost $30 trillion until 2030, according to the International Renewable Energy Association (IRENA).

Of course, these are not mutually exclusive sets of requirements. But $5-7 trillion every year would mean deploying about 5-7% of the global GDP to climate action. A few years ago, the estimated requirements used to add up to just about 1-1.5% of global GDP. This shows the rapidly rising cost of inaction.

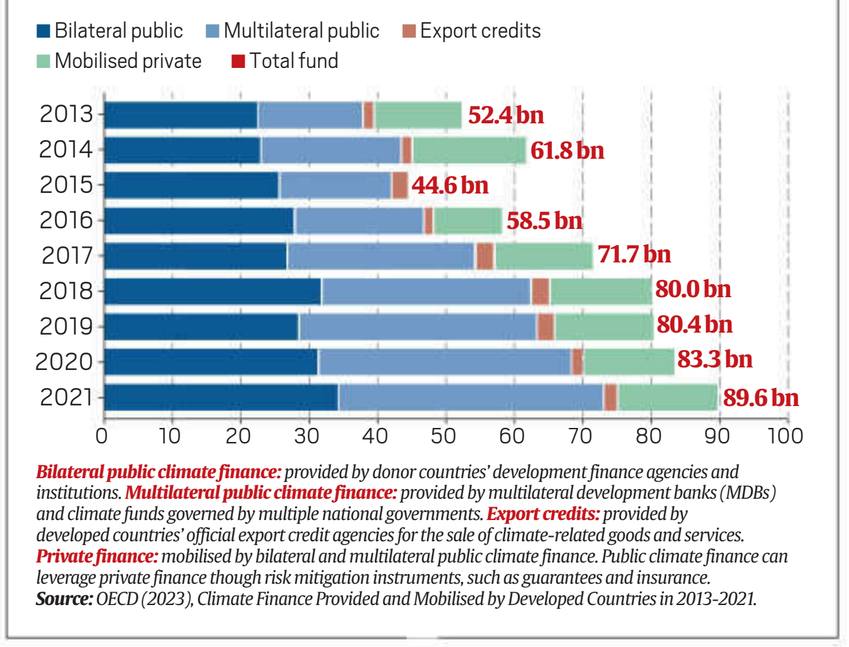
What are the prospects for a realistic new annual climate finance target?

At this point, even the possible amounts under discussion are not in the public domain. But it would probably be too much to expect that the developed countries, which have been unable to mobilise even $100 billion a year until now, would commit to raising an amount that is even remotely close to the assessed requirements.

In a recent submission made to UN Climate Change, India called upon developed countries to ensure that the NCQG was "at least US$1 trillion per year, composed primarily of grants and concessional finance". India's submission was one of several inputs that will feed into the ongoing discussions on the NCQG.

CLIMATE FINANCE FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Climate finance mobilised by developed countries, in USD billions



Bilateral public climate finance: *provided by donor countries' development finance agencies and institutions.* ***Multilateral public climate finance:*** *provided by multilateral development banks (MDBs) and climate funds governed by multiple national governments.* ***Export credits:*** *provided by developed countries' official export credit agencies for the sale of climate-related goods and services.* ***Private finance:*** *mobilised by bilateral and multilateral public climate finance. Public climate finance can leverage private finance though risk mitigation instruments, such as guarantees and insurance.*
Source: *OECD (2023), Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2013-2021.*

At the Copenhagen ministerial meeting last week, Simon Stiell, Executive Secretary of UN Climate Change, urged the developed countries to make climate finance "bigger and better".

"We are talking trillions, not billions. That is going to require more from all sources and serious conversations about making new innovative sources real, rather than just words on a page," he said.

Ironically, Stiell's own organisation is facing a severe shortage of funds. "In this talk of climate finance and transparency, I do need to mention that our organisation, the UNFCCC, now faces severe financial challenges... Our budget is currently less than half funded. We are attempting to meet an ever-growing mandate... Our job is to make your job easier, to carry out the tasks you have all agreed we should do, but we can only do this if we have the funding support," he said.

UN Climate Change, which organises dozens of climate meetings every year and facilitates the implementation of various decisions and agreements, depends heavily on contributions from countries and voluntary organisations for carrying out its work.

How will this money be used?

The new amount, even if far from sufficient for the climate challenge the world faces, will be higher than the current commitment of $100 billion, since that is the mandate of the NCQG.

However, the delivery of that amount will be critical. Even $100 billion was considered a decent sum when it was promised back in 2009 — and it could have made a substantial difference if it had been delivered in full in time (from 2020 onward).

The developing countries would like to make sure that a transparent and inclusive process is instituted to monitor and measure whatever amount is finally agreed upon. Unlike the $100 billion figure, which was offered without any consultations, the NCQG will be the result of negotiations, and countries will have better control over compliance.

The way the new sum is distributed across different kinds of needs — mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and several others — will also be important. Climate finance flows are currently heavily skewed in favour of mitigation actions, while developing countries have been demanding that more money be made available for adaptation and other activities.

ASI will 'delist' some 'lost' monuments. What's happening, and why?

DIVYA A
NEW DELHI, MARCH 26

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL Survey of India (ASI) has decided to delist 18 "centrally protected monuments" that it has assessed are not of national importance. The 18 are part of an earlier list of monuments the ASI had said were "untraceable".

These include a medieval highway milestone recorded as Kos Minar No.13 at Mujessar village in Haryana, Barakhamba Cemetery in Delhi, Gunner Burkill's tomb in Jhansi district, a cemetery at Gaughat in Lucknow, and the Telia Nala Buddhist ruins in Varanasi. The precise location of these monuments, or their current physical state, is not known.

What does 'delisting' mean?

The ASI, which works under the Union Ministry of Culture, is responsible for protecting and maintaining certain monuments and archaeological sites that have been declared of national importance under The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act, 1904 and The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (AMASR Act).

Delisting a monument effectively means it will no longer be conserved and protected by the ASI. Under the AMASR Act, any kind of construction-related activity is not allowed around a protected site. Once the monument is delisted, activities related to construction and urbanisation in the area can be carried out in a regular manner.

ASI currently has 3,693 monuments under its purview, which will fall to 3,675 once the delisting exercise is completed in the next few weeks. This is the first such large-scale delisting exercise in several decades.

The gazette notification for the 18 monuments in question was issued on March 8. There is a two-month window for the public to send in "objections or suggestions".

What does it mean for a monument to be 'untraceable'?

The AMASR Act protects monuments and sites that are more than 100 years old, including temples, cemeteries, inscriptions, tombs,



A Mughal-era Kos Minar in the Delhi zoo. A similar milestone in Haryana faces delisting. *Wikimedia Commons*

forts, palaces, step-wells, rock-cut caves, and even objects like cannons and mile pillars (kos minars) that may be of historical significance. These sites are scattered across the country and, over the decades, some have been lost to activities such as urbanisation, encroachments, the construction of dams and reservoirs, or sheer neglect.

Under the AMASR Act, the ASI should regularly inspect protected monuments. In cases of encroachment, the ASI can file a police complaint, issue a show-cause notice for the removal of the encroachment, and communicate to the local administration the need for demolition of encroachments.

This, however, has not happened with uniform effectiveness. The ASI was founded in 1861. The bulk of the currently protected monuments were taken under the ASI's wings from the 1920s to the 1950s, but in the decades after Independence, the government spent its meagre resources more on health, education and infrastructure, than protecting heritage, officials said. The ASI also concentrated more on uncovering new monuments and sites instead of protecting existing ones.

EXPLAINED CULTURE

How many historical monuments have been lost in this way?

In December 2022, the Ministry of Culture submitted to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture that 50 of India's 3,693 centrally protected monuments were missing. Fourteen of these had been lost to rapid urbanisation, 12 were submerged by reservoirs/ dams, and the remaining 24 were untraceable, the Ministry told the Committee.

The Committee was informed that security guards were posted at only 248 of the 3,693 protected monuments. In its report on 'Issues relating to Untraceable Monuments and Protection of Monuments in India', the Committee "noted with dismay that out of the total requirement of 7,000 personnel for the protection of monuments, the government could provide only 2,578 security personnel at 248 locations due to budgetary constraints".

Was 2022 the first time that the disappearance of these monuments was noticed?

ASI officials had told *The Indian Express* then that no comprehensive physical survey of all monuments had ever been conducted after Independence. However, in 2013, a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India had said that at least 92 centrally protected monuments across the country had gone missing.

The CAG report said that the ASI did not have reliable information on the exact number of monuments under its protection. It recommended that periodic inspection of each protected monument be carried out. The Culture ministry accepted the proposal.

The Parliamentary panel noted that "out of the 92 monuments declared as missing by the CAG, 42 have been identified due to efforts made by the ASI". Of the remaining 50, 26 were accounted for, as mentioned earlier, while the other 24 remained untraceable. Eleven of these monuments are in Uttar Pradesh, two each in Delhi and Haryana, and others in states like Assam, West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Opinion

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2024



INDIA'S MARITIME IMPACT

Union minister for external affairs S Jaishankar

"India has a long and distinguished maritime tradition, whose civilisational imprint is still visible...Today, our Act East policy and the Indo-Pacific Vision have given it a more contemporary form

Apple's travails

If commission charges and listing policies are focused on, Big Tech disputes can be tackled with no risk to innovation

THE COINCIDENCE IS certainly interesting. Around the time the ministry of corporate affairs-led committee has recommended an ex-ante regulatory framework for digital platforms in India, the US department of justice and 15 states have sued Apple for monopolising the smartphone market, which is hurting smaller rivals and driving up prices. The lawsuit has accused the company of blocking rivals from accessing hardware and software features on its popular devices. The sum and substance of the charge is that if left unchallenged, Apple will only continue to strengthen its smartphone monopoly. The US action comes after the antitrust action taken against the consumer electronics giant's app store in the European Union. Apple has defended itself vigorously, stating that the US lawsuit is wrong on facts and law and that any action would set a dangerous precedent of empowering the government to take a heavy hand in designing people's technology.

It's not only Apple. Big tech firms in general have been at loggerheads with regulators across the world, for quite some time now. For instance, Apple has been facing a probe in Europe over issues related to compliance of the Digital Markets Act. Google, Meta, and Amazon have also been having frequent run-ins with the regulators, especially in the European Union. The crux of the problem lies in the manner in which Apple or other such big tech firms operate. No doubt, they all are innovative and keep coming up with cutting-edge technological applications, which benefit consumers. But the flip side is that in the process they have ended up controlling the operating system, on which other developers are dependent, leading to charges of denial of a level playing field.

For instance, Apple is just not a manufacturer of smartphones. It also owns the operating system, iOS and the app store. Similarly, Google owns the Android operating system, as well as the Play Store on which various other developers need to list their apps. In addition, Google also owns the search engine, GPS maps etc. Being vertically integrated organisations, they control the entire ecosystem—software and hardware—and fix commission charges which are opposed by smaller players. The result is run-ins with antitrust regulators the world over. While the EU has been tough in terms of regulations, the US has generally been seen as not very restrictive and balancing innovation with regulation. India is also battling to come up with a middle path solution, recently suggesting an ex-ante framework against the current ex-post.

One of the options that analysts have been suggesting is unbundling of these organisations in the manner in which the monopoly of US telecom giant AT&T was broken several decades back. While this may sound fine theoretically, in this day and age, the same may be difficult to implement in practice. Further, innovation could become a casualty in the process. While the US lawsuit against Apple will take its own time, and it's difficult to speculate the course it will take, the ideal way forward is to regulate only what matters. It's the commission charges and listing process over which a majority of the disputes happen. In India, while the Competition Commission of India has passed strictures against Google, it's still silent on a similar case against Apple probably because of its low market share. If regulators worldwide focus on regulating commission charges and listing policies, the bulk of the disputes can be tackled without any risk to innovation.

EMERGING STAR

INDIA'S RISE AS A GLOBAL POWER CREATES A TIGHTROPE OF DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

The giant has arrived

MOHAMED A EL-ERIAN
MICHAEL SPENCE
Respectively, professor, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania; and Nobel laureate in economics and emeritus professor, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University



INDIA'S RECENT ECONOMIC success, solid momentum, and promising prospects are making the country ever more influential both regionally and internationally. But the experience of other countries suggests that such rapid influence and robust progress can be tricky to manage. An action that makes sense domestically may conflict with what other countries expect from a systemically important economy. Meanwhile, actions that make sense internationally could complicate domestic economic progress.

Poised for continued growth

China plays an important role in India's recent growth story. Its high middle-income levels imply that it was destined eventually to shed labour-intensive manufacturing and assembly jobs. But that process has been accelerated by the rapid diversification of global supply chains. Most likely, there will be demand-side inducements for India to expand its tradable sector, with manufacturing for export providing employment opportunities for the lower-income rural sectors.

Apple, for example, is expanding iPhone assembly in India, in collaboration with partners like the Taiwanese manufacturer Foxconn. India already accounts for 7% of iPhone production, and much of that is for export. That said, net foreign-direct-investment (FDI) flows into India declined sharply in the current fiscal year, and it remains to be seen whether there will be a wave of export-driven investment in manufacturing sectors.

India also already has a thriving digital and financial sector. With a large and growing domestic economy, it has a natural advantage in large-scale digital innovation, owing to the fact that such technologies tend to have relatively high fixed costs, but low variable costs.

As with manufacturing, recent developments in China bear on this issue. Owing to changes in China's economic and governance model and its deteriorating relations with some advanced economies (most notably the US), external capital has been leaving, leading to an influx of capital into India. If not managed carefully, these inflows could complicate economic policymaking by impacting the currency and competitiveness.

Cautionary tales

With India expected to remain the world's fastest-growing major economy, policymakers face the increasingly complex challenge of balancing external and internal interests, while still maintaining the country's growth and development trajectory. Multinational corporations have also faced this dilemma when considering whether and how to change where they operate. Such changes can create many operational and reputational challenges.

India should seek to play a larger role in the world's multilateral institutions, where it could be a strong voice for constructive reform

Whether the lesson comes from China or Big Tech, India should heed it. Recent history shows that the necessary internal course corrections, as well as the ability to shape international perceptions, can come late or be insufficient. As a result, a country's (or a company's) secular transformation can end up being more complicated than it needs to be.

India's multinationals are increasingly looking abroad for growth opportunities. The increased influx of foreign companies and other foreign investment flows will heighten the focus on domestic labour conditions, as will the larger volume of incoming FDI. India also is attracting more foreign portfolio capital, partly due to more investors growing worried about geopolitical tensions and the prospect of China becoming un-investable.

India's impressive recent technological successes will also add to its global systemic importance. Its thriving digital economy has allowed it to offer a superior open architecture for digital finance, making it a prime example of a massive country where money can move quickly and cheaply. Moreover, India's multilingual technical capabilities are especially suitable for greater exports to many other countries undergoing similar technology-driven development.

No time to waste

Given India's growing systemic importance across so many dimensions, current and future generations alike would benefit from early steps to minimise the risks and maximise the opportunities presented by a larger global footprint.

On the domestic front, India is on the cusp of an even greater inflow of FDI and portfolio investors. Such capital has many benefits, of course, including job creation, technology transfer, and greater access to cheaper funding.

But as other countries' experience shows, large inflows require rapid adaptation of policies and policymakers' mindsets, as well as measures to overcome internal resistance from domestic incumbents. Otherwise, the benefits will be more than offset by the serious threat of macroeconomic instability, severe resource misallocation, excessive risk taking, and corruption.

Looking outward, India needs to foster much deeper cooperative interactions with key bilateral trading partners, regional institutions, and international platforms. Its status as a founder of the New Development Bank—established by the BRICS grouping in 2014—does not preclude the need for closer ties with the Asian Development Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and other global institutions.

Given its success and outlook, India can no longer claim to be an economically small developing country with few global spillovers. Its growing systemic importance will bring a larger set of risks and opportunities. India today is near where China and Big Tech were before they inadvertently triggered reactions that have complicated their growth strategies and undermined their reputations. India must lose no time in managing its growing footprint, so that its domestic priorities align with international realities.

When China was at a similar stage of economic development 16 years ago, it ran a current account surplus of 10% of GDP. With Chinese policymakers focused on the stock-market bubble in 2007, they ignored growing external concerns about mercantilism and "unfair" competition until it was too late.

The lesson is that a purely reactive approach, with its inevitable delayed response, is much less effective than a balanced approach combining proactive and reactive elements. The current Indian government, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appears to understand this, and has been generally praised for how it has navigated today's highly complex and tense global environment.

But there is more work to be done. India should seek to play a larger role in the world's multilateral institutions, where it could be a strong voice for constructive reform. But like it or not, China and India are both destined to be giants in the global economy. Working gradually toward a more constructive relationship that is consistent with its other geopolitical priorities (including vis-à-vis the US) should be an objective for India. It is also a key element in both countries' ability to manage their expanding global footprints.

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Patrick Drahi offers a painful lesson in negotiation



CHRIS HUGHES
Bloomberg

WELCOME TO NEGOTIATION, Patrick Drahi style.

Back in August, the billionaire struck a deferential tone when addressing bondholders financing his overindebted Altice telecoms empire. The business was facing challenges on all sides: rising interest costs; weak operating performance; a corruption probe in Portugal. Drahi made an unusual personal appearance when Altice France SA, the core business, announced quarterly results and outlined plans to cut borrowings by selling assets and potentially buying back some of the debt where it was trading below fair value.

But last week, his underlings flagged a far more aggressive plan — one that implicitly relied on a lot of bondholders being paid back less than their due. The change of tack saw Altice France's bonds plummet. Drahi was nowhere to be heard.

At the centre of all this is Altice France's more pessimistic assessment of the level of borrowings it can hold. Previously, the firm was trying to get the ratio of net debt to profit (as measured by earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation) to around five times. Now it wants to get below four. As Altice shrinks with the sale of higher-quality assets, the suggestion is that the remaining business will have lower overall borrowing capacity.

The new target implies a painful journey to get indebtedness down. Net borrowings, accounting for recent asset sales, stand at €24 billion ($26 billion), a heady 6.4 times Ebitda. Guidance for this year's performance was gloomy, with Ebitda set to fall by a mid- to high-single-digit percentage. That puts fresh upward pressure on the leverage ratio. One reason for the situation being so stubbornly dire is that disposals aren't creating the result the market was hoping for. Altice has compartmentalised sale proceeds so they don't directly bring down the debt.

The impression given by all this was pretty stark: The company is unsustainable in its current form. You can see the logic. Recent telecoms transactions in Europe have valued entire businesses at lower multiples of profit than Altice France's net leverage multiple, as Bloomberg Intelligence analyst Aidan Cheslin pointed out in October after Vodafone Group Plc's disposal of its Spanish operations.

So where does this leave bondholders? They could be forgiven for thinking that bond buybacks were originally to play a minor role in getting leverage down, and investors would participate on a voluntary basis. The implication of the new plan is that discounted debt trades will have to do some really heavy lifting.

Any debt buyback proposals may therefore have to be accompanied by carrot-and-stick incentives. For example, might investors be invited to take a haircut on holdings in return for gaining seniority over fellow borrowers? Those who didn't participate in the exchange would then rank lower in the pecking order in any bankruptcy.

The company isn't going into details beyond saying it couldn't exclude anything. Debtholders can but dream that an equity injection is still among the options.

Of course, this may simply be the start of a negotiated restructuring deal with creditors. Some borrowers were already coalescing into a group before last week's bombshell, Bloomberg News reported. A classic negotiating tactic is to start with an extreme position and then "cede" ground on the road to an agreement. The fall in Altice's bonds puts more pressure on holders to acquiesce to debt exchange terms that emerge later.

The question now is how much Drahi's creditors are willing to go along with the new dynamic. Drahi's calculation is presumably that when push comes to shove, they'd rather play ball than take the keys. The clock is ticking. In 2025, the company has €1.3 billion falling due. Even if proceeds from asset sales can get the company over that hump, the refinancing schedule gets a lot more painful in 2027. A recent private placement raised €350 million at a nosebleed 11.5% rate.

Suppose Drahi has judged the situation correctly, and he can ultimately coax investors into cutting back their debt claims. This episode won't be forgotten in a hurry. As a long-term user of the debt markets, Drahi shouldn't be surprised when investors hold his feet to the fire the moment they have the upper hand.

Lessons from the Gemini fiasco



A DAMODARAN
Visiting professor, Ahmedabad University
Views are personal

As the GenAI landscape heats up, a fierce competition has emerged between established tech giants and startups. But this has exposed some cracks, as seen with the recent Gemini fumble

TWO INCIDENTS ROCKED the generative AI scene last month—the failure of Google's much-vaunted new AI chatbot tool, Gemini, and the malfunctioning of ChatGPT.

Of the two, Gemini's failure was particularly glaring, since it involved historically inaccurate texts and politically and culturally sensitive images. Google promptly went on a damage control mode, by turning off its problematic image generator from the Gemini system.

Critics of Google feel that the tech behemoth was rushed when it came to releasing the Gemini Chatbot. Former Google employees lay the blame for Gemini's failure on the company's 'risk-averse leadership style' and top-down decision making.

While these contentions may have an element of truth, the larger factor accounting for Gemini's failure is the peculiar pattern of growth and competition witnessed in the Generative AI space, ever since Open AI launched ChatGPT.

Goliath challenges David

One of the most interesting features of the GenAI arena has been the absence of direct competition between large players. Tech Goliaths like Google are either locked in competition with talented Davids like Open AI who enjoy the first mover advantage, or fight one another through proxies (a case in point is the tussle between Anthropic and Open AI). The problem with the Goliath-David competition in the GenAI space is that nervous Goliaths who go for a swift kill end up badly bruising themselves.

Too many, too soon

The launch of ChatGPT on November 30, 2022 has triggered an avalanche of GenAI products. The list includes a slew of chatbots powered by Large Language Models (LLMs), a variety of plugins, APIs, AI-powered virtual assistants, and co-pilot aids targeted at developers and individual users alike.

The Gemini fiasco has dealt a huge blow to players in the GenAI sector. In its wake, the government of India released its advisory for tech behemoths

The year 2023 witnessed the rapid entry of multimodal foundation AI models from leading AI tech companies, each seeking to beat the other. This trend continues in 2024. Open AI's latest text-to-video sensation Sora, launched in mid-February 2024, has already met a match in Alibaba's EMO.

New foundation models (FMs) claim their superiority on account of greater parameter count, larger context window, and high computation efficiency. Both Google's Gemini Ultra and Meta's Llama 2 are expected to outdo GPT-4. Anthropic and Mistral AI are also in the race to launch advanced FMs that can outperform GPT-4.

Perhaps what is most interesting about this race is the frenetic pace at which OpenAI's rivals replace their own models in a bid to stay ahead of their rivals. Anthropic's Claude 2.1 followed Claude 1.3 in four months. Meta's launched Llama 2, three months after Llama 1.

As multimodal AI models grow in size, their data requirements vastly increase both in terms of volume and complexity, thus drastically increasing demand for data centres. This phenomenally increases the costs of building advanced FMs. OpenAI spent $4.6 billion to develop GPT-3, a product that goes back to 2020. Experts speculate that the much-anticipated GPT-5 would need finances to the tune of $1.25-2.5 billion just for training the model. Under these circumstances, the economic costs of product failure in the GenAI space can be astoundingly high.

The game that has worked well

In hindsight, OpenAI's strategy of rapidly scaling up its customer base for ChatGPT proved to be superbly successful. In the past 15 months, OpenAI has not only retained its initial customer base but also managed to drastically enlarge the same, thanks to its adroit strategy of releasing 'easy to use' plug-ins, virtual assistant apps, and attractive image generation models. By abandoning its nonprofit pretensions and embracing the subscription model for its ChatGPT Plus last year, OpenAI not only warmed the hearts of its investors but also became the hot favourite of valuation gurus. Today, it enjoys a staggering valuation level of $80 billion.

Future direction

The Gemini fiasco has dealt a huge blow to leading players in the GenAI sector. In the wake of the debacle, the government of India released its advisory to AI tech behemoths, insisting that they seek prior permission before launching their products, go for disclosures, and label products which are undergoing testing.

In the future, AI FMs would be subject to elongated phases of containment and controlled deployment before their release for large-scale use. Labelling GenAI products too appears to be a reality, even in countries which have had a liberal approach towards it.

Yet another likely consequence of the Gemini fiasco is that it will bring changes in AI model training regimes. Unsupervised learning (that relies on unlabelled data for training models) is likely to face increasing scrutiny. Even training tools that rely on labelled data, like supervised learning, may come under verifiable standards and protocols.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The right to elect an Opposition

When the convenor of a national party that won by a landslide in two states is arrested after the notification of elections, the concept of level playing fields would seem vitiated. Coming as it does with the general elections announced and Code of Conduct in force, there could well be a case of infringement on the prerogative of the electorate who has as much right to elect a government as to elect an Opposition. This must then fall within the purview of the ECI whose primary remit is being the guardian of the electorate. Thus, the ECI ought to be seeking the bail of the convenor of a national party to strengthen the sinews of a progressive electoral democracy. The law courts may well continue to address the judicial aspect, but the ECI has the larger onus of keeping up electoral equilibrium and providing a fair opportunity to every contesting party. That remit should prevail over all else.
—R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

The Indian EV market

Apropos of "Another Maruti moment?", for Sajjan Jindal, making cars has been a childhood dream. He built his first car at the tender age of 12 years. So, tying up with China's SIAC motors for rolling out electric cars is a natural progression. Whether this would turn out to be another Maruti moment would be interesting to see as EVs face two big hurdles in the form of a lack of robust charging infrastructure and higher buying cost than ICE-driven cars. So, Jindal would have to account for these two before aiming to become the next Maruti. Needless to say that Tatas have the first mover advantage in electric cars.
—Bal Govind, Noida

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EDITORIAL



"Which is more musical, a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?" — John Cage

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
— Ramnath Goenka

TELANGANA BUGGING CASE RENEWS CALL FOR BETTER OVERSIGHT

A serious issue that was flying under the radar in Telangana till recently swung to the centre of the political battlefield this week. About a fortnight ago, a deputy superintendent of police at the state's Special Intelligence Branch (SIB) was arrested for allegedly tapping the phones of a large number of people. By some accounts, he was eavesdropping on around 1,200 people from different walks of life including politics. On Tuesday, former minister K T Rama Rao of the BRS, during whose time in power the phone-taps are said to have been ordered, urged current Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy to order a probe, even as several Congress and BJP leaders claimed their phones had been tapped.

The remand report of D Praneeth Rao, the accused DSP who had been at the SIB since 2016, reads like the script of a riveting intelligence drama. He apparently had two rooms equipped with 17 computers exclusively for his use, with servers located in different places. Following the change of guard in the state, he allegedly destroyed the hard drives and threw away the pieces in Anantagiri forest. Former SIB chief T Prabhakhar Rao, who was retained in the position as officer on special duty even after his retirement in 2020, has now been named the prime accused; he is reported to be in the US for medical treatment. Additional superintendents N Bhujanga Rao and M Thirupatanna, who were arrested on Saturday, have also been named among the accused.

Was it taken for granted that an SIB official could tap phones with impunity even without proper authorisation from the home ministry? If this was the case, and opposition leaders were not spared, what about the common man? The Supreme Court has made it clear in different verdicts that the right to privacy is a fundamental right. The top court ruled in the *Puttaswamy* case that the right to privacy is an intrinsic part of the Constitution's Article 21. Though there are restrictions, any interference or violation must be sanctioned by law. It is also difficult to understand how the shenanigans in Telangana fall under the categories defined in Section 5 of the Indian Telegraph Act, 1885. One possible way of preventing unwarranted wire-tapping by agencies is to introduce legislative oversight. This way, the powers that be will at least think twice before misusing the agencies for political gain.

HARDIK BOOING UNLIKE INDIAN CRICKET FANS

ON Sunday, there was an unfamiliar incident during the match between Gujarat Titans and Mumbai Indians at Ahmedabad. Unfamiliar because it is not usually associated with Indian cricket—booing, though there are exceptions. But it has not been seen in franchise cricket the way it is prevalent, say, in European football. Some of us may remember that a pig's head was thrown at Luis Figo after he moved to Real Madrid from Barcelona in the early 2000s. The football world is strewn with such incidents of hooliganism and atavistic rituals. Yet, despite the IPL being 17 years old, there has hardly been any booing or lewd gesture thrown at players by opposing fans.

That's why it was a surprise when the Ahmedabad crowd booed Hardik Pandya as the Mumbai Indians captain walked in for the toss. Booing is not unheard of in cricket, but it's rare. It's simply because fans identify a player with the national team first, before the club. Stars are cheered irrespective of their franchise allegiance. Take this season's first match, where Virat Kohli was loudly cheered when he was in the Chennai Super Kings den. However, as the adage goes, there is no smoke without fire. Hardik was the Gujarat captain and, suddenly late last year, moved to Mumbai, where he was declared the captain replacing Rohit Sharma. Touted as the next big thing for a long time, India had been grooming Hardik as a GenNext leader. Perhaps the fans have not taken to it sportingly enough. Leading the team against his former club, too, had its own peril. Since Rohit is one of the most loved players in Indian cricket and has quite a big fan following, things will not be easy for Hardik. With Jasprit Bumrah, one of the best bowlers in the Mumbai mix, also being overlooked for captain, Hardik will constantly be under the scanner.

Though there is immense support for the teams from Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai or Kolkata, the IPL inter-franchise rivalry is yet to reach the heady heights of the Premier League or La Liga. With more IPL matches sharpening the rivalries, this might just be the beginning of extreme fan reactions. However, as long as fans identify with the national team's success and its stars, the Hardik incident will always be a rarity.

QUICK TAKE

CONDEMN & STOP SEXIST ATTACKS

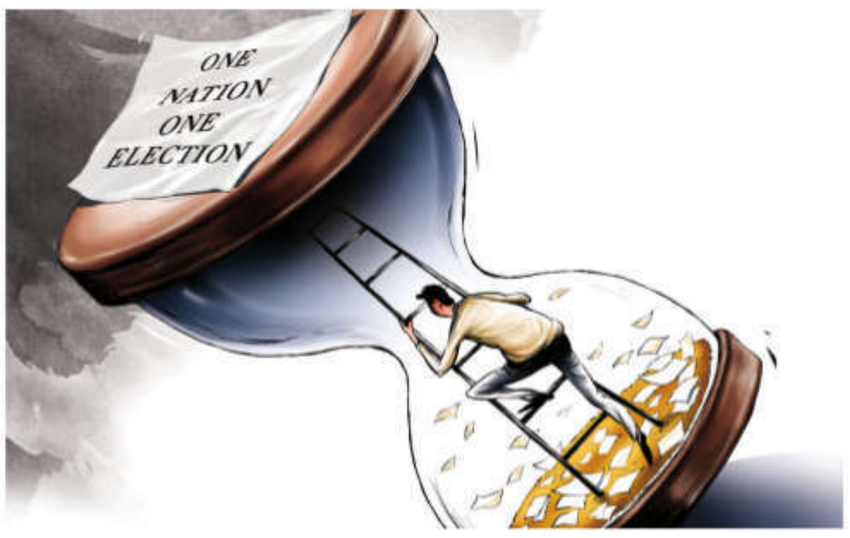
SOME level of mudslinging is inevitable in an election season. But the derogatory remark made on Congress leader Supriya Shrinate's social media account about BJP's Lok Sabha candidate from Mandi Kangana Ranaut has hit a new low. The distasteful remark equating the Himachal town with prostitution should be condemned by all, irrespective of political affiliation. Shrinate's initial defence that someone else "with access" to her accounts posted it is indefensible, because it's her prerogative to give that right. Let us not stoop to using sexist barbs demeaning a profession or person. It should not be difficult for the Congress leadership to unequivocally condemn such comments.

The Kovind Committee is the latest in a number of panels advising simultaneous elections. Synchronising polls will take time, but the possibility is closer than ever in recent decades

ONE ELECTION WILL ALLOW BETTER FOCUS ON GOVERNANCE



A SURYA PRAKASH
Vice-Chairman, Executive Council, Prime Ministers Museum and Library, New Delhi



SOURAV ROY

THE high-level committee headed by former President Ramnath Kovind has provided the template for India to return to the system of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, which got completely disrupted over half a century ago.

After a comprehensive examination of the constitutional, administrative and other issues involved in bringing about simultaneity, the committee has recommended that this process could begin with a Lok Sabha poll, possibly in 2029. The Kovind Committee's recommendations are not surprising, because several other institutions and agencies have argued in favour of synchronising the elections—including the Election Commission of India, Law Commission, National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, a standing committee of parliament, and NITI Aayog. While all these institutions agreed on the need to hold the elections simultaneously, there was considerable divergence in their views on execution of the plan. However, the Kovind Committee's recommendations offer a 360-degree view of the problem and what appears to be the most practical way to resolve it, although it is rather complex.

The committee held extensive consultations with political parties, citizens and other stakeholders. Among the national political parties, only two out of six—Bharatiya Janata Party and National People's Party—favoured the idea of evolving a system to ensure simultaneity. Among the state parties, 13 out of 33 liked the idea, while seven parties were against it; the remaining 13 parties preferred to remain neutral. Interestingly, four former chief justices of India—Dipak Misra, Ranjan Gogoi, Sharad Arvind Bobde and Uday Umesh Lalit—were in favour of simultaneous polls, as also were nine out of the 12 chief justices of high courts who participated in the consultations.

After taking note of the recommendations from different political parties and other stakeholders, the Kovind Committee stated, "The loss of simultaneity in elections after the first two decades of India's independence has had a baneful effect on the economy, polity and society. Initially, two elections were held every 10 years. Now several elections are held every year." This cast a huge burden on government, businesses, workers, courts, political parties, candidates contesting elections and civil society at large. The committee therefore recommended that the government should develop "a legally tenable mechanism" to restore the cycle of simultaneous elections.

In order to bring about this synchronisation, the panel recommended that the President of India may, by notification issued on the date of the first sitting of the Lok Sabha after a general election, fix an 'appointed date'; the tenure of all state assemblies constituted after that date and before the expiry of the full term of the Lok Sabha shall be only for the period up to the subsequent election to the Lok Sabha. Thereafter, all general elections to the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies shall be held simultaneously.

In the second phase, elections to municipalities and panchayats will be synchronised with this. Further, the committee has said that should the Lok Sabha be dissolved prematurely, fresh elections should be held to constitute a new House, but its tenure will be limited to the unexpired term of the dissolved House. If parliament amends the Constitution and the election laws as suggested, the process of synchronisation could begin with the president's notification soon after the constitution of the new Lok Sabha in 2029, and the alignment of the national and state elections would be completed by 2034. This is indeed a long haul, taking a full decade to finalise, but it is worth it.

As the Kovind Committee has pointed out, we have seen 400 elections to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies since independence. This is truly mind-blogging and a major impediment to governance and national progress. Democracy should not result in reckless political manoeuvrings and election-mania that leads to policy paralysis, governance deficit and disrupts normal life and the functioning of essential services. The committee has rightly rejected the opinion of the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist); both claimed that if the elections were synchronised, it would be "fundamentally anti-democratic" and would strike at the root of parliamentary democracy.

Does it lie in the mouth of a Congress leader to put forth these arguments when all the stalwarts of the party who drafted the Constitution—including Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad—approved simultaneous elections in the 1950s and 1960s. The system suited the party in the first two decades after the Constitution came into being. Secondly, electoral data shows that the people vote differently in the Lok Sabha and state assembly elections these days. There are dozens of examples of this in recent years from states such as Delhi, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. As the largest democracy in the world, Indians take pride in the electoral choices they make and in the potpourri of political parties which they have promoted over the years. For example, the Second Lok Sabha had 12 political parties; this number is now around 40.

It is now up to the new government that is formed after the Lok Sabha elections next June to consider these recommendations. Currently, most opinion polls seem to indicate that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance is headed for a two-thirds majority. If the opinion polls turn out right, one can safely predict that simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the state assemblies will be on top of the agenda for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his third term for two reasons. First, he has a penchant for diving into the most complex issues which appear irresolute and resolving them—abrogation of Article 370 and reservation of a third of the seats in parliament and state assemblies for women are immediate examples that come to mind. Second, he is likely to have the requisite strength in both Houses of parliament to ensure passage of the constitutional and other legislative measures to bring about simultaneity.

One must look forward to an end to the current chaos vis-a-vis elections and a return to a more orderly electoral exercise once in five years all over the nation, so all governments at the Centre and in the states can focus on governance and national development for much of that period.

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LOUDSPEAKER RAJ: SUFFERING NOISE POLLUTION IN SILENCE



B K SHARMA
Former Director General of Police, Odisha

THE deafening noise of DJs and public address systems have emerged as a bane of modern life. Many of us—old or young, healthy or delicate, sleepaholic or insomniac—often suffer from uncontrolled cacophony in our neighbourhood or public area. Come elections, and noise levels in both urban and rural areas destabilise lives and inflict misery on helpless citizens. However, the enforcement authorities tasked with protecting us from such debilitating intrusion often turn a deaf ear.

The Centre in 2000 framed the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules that prescribe permissible noise levels or ambient air quality for different areas, separately for day and night time. While the maximum permissible noise level for residential areas respectively for day and night time has been fixed at 55 and 45 dB(A), those for Silence Zones are 50 and 40 dB(A). Rules also state a loudspeaker shall not be used between 10 pm and 6 am, except in closed premises like auditoriums, conference rooms, community and banquet halls; that too, for communication within. Further, a loudspeaker shall not be used except after obtaining written permission of the competent authority. The Rules, however, are confined to books only and flagrant violations are the norm.

In July 2005, the then Chief Justice R C Lahoti held that noise adversely affects the right to life, which is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 21 of the Constitution; he ordered that, first, noise level shall not exceed 10dB above the standard ambient noise for the area or 75dB, whichever is lower; second, no one shall use amplifiers between 10 pm and 6 am except in public emergencies; and third, states shall make provision for confiscation of loudspeakers and amplifiers found to create noise beyond the permissible limit. Earlier, in *Church of God in India vs KKR Majestic Colony Welfare Association* (August 2000), the Supreme Court had held even religious activities cannot be blasted on amplifiers.

The rules provide it is the responsibility of authorities, defined as District Magistrate or Police Commissioner or any other officer not below the rank of a DSP, to enforce noise pollution control measures. Anyone can make a complaint and the authority can prohibit emission of such excess noise, besides initiating necessary legal action against the violators. Contravention can make one liable for imprisonment up to 5 years and/or a fine up ₹1 lakh, provided the complaint is filed by 'authorised' officials, which includes central and state pollution control board officials and collectors and sub-divisional magistrates.

While action by such authorised officials have been few and far between, the police, in absence of power to prosecute under the Rules except in states like Karnataka, often treats noise pollution as a "public nuisance" under Section 268 of the IPC, thereby making it punishable under Section 290, which provides for a meagre fine of up to ₹200. The police also move the executive magistrate to pass an order under Section 133 of the CrPC for the removal of such nuisance. In case of failure to do so, the violator becomes liable for punishment under sections 188 and 291 of the IPC, which provide for a maximum imprisonment of only 6 months.



EXPRESS

Only a handful of states such as Odisha, Bihar, Assam and Madhya Pradesh have enacted laws to control the use of loudspeakers. However, prescribed punishments are often too lenient & the laws are observed more in breach. Helpless citizens' pleas seem to fall on deaf ears

National Crime Records Bureau data shows that 7,378 police cases were registered in India during 2022 relating to noise pollution. Almost 99 percent of the cases were registered in Rajasthan alone, while UP registered just one case. As many as 20 states registered no case at all. Rajasthan is the only state that makes contravention a cognisable offence under section 7 of Rajasthan Noise Control Act,1963, which explains why well-nigh all noise pollution cases are registered there. 99% of cases have ended in conviction, largely because of admissions of the accused since the prescribed punishment is a meagre fine of maximum Rs 250 for the first conviction. Resultantly, the impact of police action is limited and the fear of law minimal.

Only a handful of states like Odisha, Bihar, Assam and Madhya Pradesh have enacted specific legislations to control the use of loudspeakers and provide punishment for contravention. However, offences for violations of noise control limits in these states are non-cognisable in nature and even the punishments are lenient, due to which police action has limited impact. State pollution control boards and magisterial authorities, conferred with power to penalise noise pollution under the Environment Protection Act,1986, are hardly seen acting. Thus, violations are widespread and flagrant. In the name of religion, temples and mosques openly violate noise limits. Election campaigning turns out to be a nightmare. Community fairs and festivities are also a time for *aperta contra legem*, or flouting the law. The result is the unmitigated suffering of helpless citizens who seemingly have no recourse to relief.

In addition to causing harmful health effects, including hearing damage, palpitation and tinnitus, louder-than-allowed sound symbolises a lack of civility, breakdown of social etiquettes and collapse of human concern. It represents a challenge to law enforcement and an imposition of hooliganism of a few upon the vast majority of silent sufferers. It is time we put a stop to this by ensuring we have befitting laws at the central or state levels, making such offences cognisable and providing for stricter punishment, including pre-conviction confiscation of the contravening equipment. Authorities mandated should also be made to act with sensitivity to protect helpless citizens.

(Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Tribal representation

Ref: *Kuki-Zos urged not to enter Manipur Lok Sabha fray* (Mar 26). This is not a good suggestion by the Indigenous Tribal Leaders' Forum (ITLF), as this will lead to non-representation of the majority for the tribal areas of the region. They should certainly contest and try to win the fight against misgovernance by the present dispensation.
K Nehru Patnaik, Visakhapatnam

Inadvisable decision

The ITLF deserves praise for advising Kukis to vote, especially at a time 60,000 people of the region remain displaced. But its resolve to keep away from contesting the polls is inadvisable. By winning a seat, they can raise their voice against the injustices faced.
Rajamani Chelladurai, Tirunelveli

Two faces

Ref: *AAP keeps up pressure, now on social media* (Mar 26). The AAP may explore ways to fight the BJP in the elections, especially post Arvind Kejriwal's arrest. But innocent or not, Kejriwal evading the ED's summons repeatedly was incorrect. The BJP's efforts in 'rooting out corrupt leaders' may be right, but what about the politicians who have joined the BJP despite scams levelled against them?
Katuru Durga Prasad Rao, Hyderabad

Cash cow

Ref: *IPL first-price: RCB ticket at ₹55,055* (Mar 26). It is evident the IPL is now a money-minting machine for the BCCI. The wealth generated from the IPL could be used to promote not just cricket, but other sports as well, which would be a great service to our nation.
Biju C Mathew, Thiruvananthapuram

Ecological balance

Ref: *India needs to bring environment issues to political mainstream* (Mar 26). Several steps have been taken by the Modi government to reduce pollution such as free LPG connections, reducing dependence on usage of fossil fuels, and subsidies for electric vehicles. Yet, more needs to be done. There should be a healthy balance between developmental activity and preservation of the environment. These should not be mutually exclusive.
Hemanth D Pai, Bengaluru

Debate heritage

Ref: *How not to have an opposition-less India* (Mar 21). The article gives a good look at the current quagmire in the body politic of India, but our cultural heritage has a pre-eminent history of healthy debate where open-minded views were shared with all. So why have an opposition at all?
Sarasvati Prasad, email

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India is Getting Billionaire-Raising

Move out of your domestic-market comfort zone

Mumbai has displaced Beijing as Asia's city with the largest number of billionaires, according to Hurun Global Rich List 2024. This ticker-tape news comes as Indian stock markets powered ahead on a robust post-Covid recovery, while China is struggling to raise economic growth. The reordering is unlikely to be permanent, because India's market capitalisation-to-GDP ratio is in overvalued territory, while it is undervalued in China. The forward earnings multiples of Indian stocks are also considerably higher than those in China, reflecting the changing preference among emerging markets by FIIs. The situation is evolving rapidly, however, with Beijing's attempts to crank up the economy. The Hong Kong Stock Exchange has already regained its position as the world's fourth biggest by market cap after having been surpassed briefly by India. The recent correction in Indian mid- and smallcaps, prodded by regulatory concern over valuation froth, will influence investor expectations.



The emergence of Mumbai as Asia's billionaire capital also serves as a marker for wealth concentration. India's economy in nominal dollars is 22% the size of China's and 14% that of the US. In per-capita terms, again in nominal dollars, India is at 21% of China's level and at 3.4% of the US. India is among economies adding most to the global billionaire population despite not being directly exposed to technology that is driving valuations on Wall Street to extraordinary levels. As India plugs deeper into a world economy driven by technology and alternative energy, given its current concentration of wealth, it should continue to contribute an outsized number of the uber-wealthy.

There is a hurdle, though, in India playing catch-up in the wealth game. For the rising tribe of Indian billionaires to amass wealth on a truly global scale, they would need to move out of the comfort zone of the domestic market. Their enterprise will need a far bigger global footprint in manufacturing and services.

With Gaza Hurting, Get Real, Israel

Not falling into the 'cause-effect trap', a UNSC resolution on Monday calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, made possible by US abstention, sends out a clear message: Israel is overdoing retribution. Escalation of the humanitarian disaster in Gaza will not lead to peace or security in the region. Through the resolution and its framing process, the world sent out a clear message that violence does not lead to peace and security, but to endless cycles of violence and humanitarian disaster. Israel is disregarding the ceasefire call, and is especially unhappy that its traditional ally has abstained in the UN call for a ceasefire, without mentioning Hamas, the original perp in this case, needing to release Israeli hostages as a prerequisite for a cessation of blowback.



Hamas, on its part, must not take the UN vote as a get-out-of-jail-free card. It is, indeed, a terrorist organisation and perpetrator of the October 7 attacks. But a ceasefire leading to a political solution is essential for peace and security in the region and to limit global crisis. Countries need to impress on Benjamin Netanyahu that the smart and right thing to do is to refrain from attacking Rafah. Compounding the humanitarian situation in Gaza is no guarantor for peace in the region. While the two-state solution seems difficult at the moment, it is the only solution for peace. The global effort must be focused on helping the Palestinian Authority (PA) and other liberal voices find their place at the table.

India must play the honest broker. Leveraging its experience of terrorism and its relationship with both Palestine and Israel, Delhi must impress on Netanyahu the importance of the ceasefire and work with PA to step up and win back control from Hamas.

GoI has selectively dropped tariffs to make it easy for foreign EVs (read: Tesla) to come in – but...

Difficulty of EV-Ness

Beyond Tesla... Teslar, Teslast



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

The way has been cleared for Tesla to enter India. GoI has succumbed to the company's demand that in return for a big investment here, India should reduce the import duty on EVs from 70-100% to just 15%. Concessions are available to all global companies, not just Tesla. But note — never before has investment in autos in India been linked to concessional imports.

I have long argued against concessions to Tesla and other foreign companies to enter India. None were given to the world's auto majors for conventional petrol and diesel vehicles. But they came anyway because the Indian market was too big to ignore. From General Motors and Ford to Toyota and Volkswagen, all came in, and some suffered losses for decades because India was too big a market to surrender easily.

Many foreign and Indian companies are already launching EVs in India. So, Tesla was not needed to kick-start a new product. But it is such an iconic company that GoI has given in. The silver lining is that so many conditions have been imposed on the giveaways that the cost will be limited, though high.

First, foreign investors will have to invest at least $500 mn. Second, duty concessions will apply for only five years to 8,000 vehicles a year costing $35,000 or more. Total tax concession will depend on the cost of each imported vehicle. But Reuters estimates it around $800 mn over five years, a huge sum. However, in the absence of a tax cut, far fewer than 8,000 vehicles a year may be imported. So, the cost may be less.

Tesla sells EVs in the US at $40,000-70,000. In China, it has cut prices to combat stiff competition from companies such as BYD — currently the biggest EV producer in the world — Nio, XPeng and Li Auto. Tesla is marketed as a luxury car in the US, Europe and China. But the Chinese market is dominated by cheap EVs by local companies. The cheapest models cost under $10,000.

Tesla has till now not attempted to make a cheap car for the masses. But, reportedly, it's doing R&D on this. Whether it succeeds remains to be seen. Its outstanding features have been elegance, design and new tech, all essential in the luxury sector. By contrast, BYD produces a full range of autos from cheap to luxury, plus electric buses. This has enabled it to overtake Tesla in volume. But Elon Musk has such a fantastic track record in innovation that none should rule out his springing a surprise in the mass market.

Tata and Mahindra have ambitious EV plans. Tata's global subsidiary, Jaguar, is going to produce 100% EVs in a few years. In India, Tata has launched Tiago at ₹10 lakh ($12,000), Punch at ₹11 lakh and Nexon at ₹15 lakh. Mahindra XUV400 is available at ₹16 lakh. Tata and Mahindra are not too worried about competition from Tesla, which caters so far to a much higher price band.

If Tesla is going to invest $500 mn in India, it faces a dilemma. If it continues focusing on high-end cars, its massive investment will have to be mostly for export, not the Indian market, which is still modest for high-end cars. If it opts for trying to produce mid-priced autos for the Indian market, it will face fierce competition from companies already here, not just Tata and Mahindra but all the global majors.

In China, Tesla has lost leadership to BYD. Tesla produces only luxury autos. But BYD produces a full range from cheap to luxury cars, apart from electric buses, for which it already has a small plant in India.

Logically, India should be wooing Chinese manufacturers that produce cars far more suited to Indian wallets. However, after the 2020 clashes in Ladakh, GoI has retaliated by blocking Chinese investments not just in security-related areas but others like autos too. Great Wall of China had proposed $1 bn investment for conventional autos, but that was blocked.

BYD also proposed a JV with Megha Engineering with an investment of $1 bn in EVs and batteries. But this was turned down. BYD is a world leader in battery technology, which is of critical importance since batteries constitute the bulk of cost of an EV. Tesla and other foreign companies may be ahead in style and fancy features, but they can't beat BYD and other Chinese companies on price. In the price-conscious Indian market, that may be conclusive.



It will be transformative

Logically, India should be wooing Chinese manufacturers that produce cars far more suited to Indian wallets. However, after the 2020 clashes in Ladakh, GoI has retaliated by blocking Chinese investments

MG Motor, a global brand now owned by the Chinese, has done well in India so far. But to secure its future, it's going to become a minority partner in a JV with Jindal South West. Perhaps this is the route by which India may ultimately get some, if not all, top Chinese EV companies. That would be far more important than getting just Tesla.

Toyota May Be The Real Gainer



Arijit Barman

Cyberpunk or Cassandra, provocateur or perceptive, Elon Musk surely knows how to control the narrative and noise.

His relentless honking at Raisina Hill's policymaking precinct for the last four years did electrify the imagination of the gov bureaucracy. That is why the auto industry executives in private see the Narendra Modi government's new EV policy, the last business announcement before the Lok Sabha polls, predominantly as a red carpet rollout for just one eccentric billionaire: Musk.

Even then, to straightjacket the initiative as 'The Tesla policy' is a cynical response. The time-bound and ceiling-based 55-85% import duty cut on EVs above a particular value, linked to specific localisation and investment milestones to boost domestic manufacturing, would benefit incumbents Tata Motors, Hyundai and VW Group as much as it would Musk, or accelerate the plans of Pham Nhat Vuong, founder of Vietnamese OEM VinFast that has been looking to set up base in Tamil Nadu. Predictably, therefore, the initial outrage of local players has evaporated after the announcement.

Is there enough juice in the fine print to get Musk all charged up about the purchasing power of India's billion-plus population for his Models 3, Y or even S? The answer may lie around the world or even in neighbouring China — the biggest EV market where Tesla's entry in 2019-20 radically turbocharged demand and sales.

Four years on, cutback in subsidies and consumer spending has seen growth rates for EVs fall behind Europe and the US after outselling both markets combined. Such deceleration has pummelled profitability and excess capacities, with EV players — HiPhi, Byton and Levdeo — going belly up.

Bernstein Research estimates carmakers in China are likely to still add capacity for 5 million cars between 2023 and 2025, most of which are EVs. Beijing is nudging players to ship out cars worldwide, further muddying the geopolitical and trade waters. India, for example, held back a billion-dollar FDI proposal for BYD's EVs even though its clean-tech commercial vehicles ply in many of our big cities. EU launched anti-subsidies probe last fall.

Does it make enough sense to recharge the company with a big-bang India entry in the short term? Importing 8,000 cars/year of the cheapest Tesla Model 3 with the new duty benefit at an estimated ₹39 lakh/car will hardly move the needle in a market that sells 4 million vehicles in all/year, of which 2% is EV.

Additionally, Musk will not enjoy 13-18% PLI benefits, unlike homegrown challengers Tata Motors and Mahindra, who are ready to offer multiple alternatives between them by 2026-27.

India's onerous rules will ensure that if Musk wants to serve in India, he has to make in India. He has been talking of a new mass-market compact crossover by mid-2025. With wage inflation going up due to the United Auto Workers strike in the US, Musk may well think of using India as a manufacturing hub to serve the local market and a production base for other emerging markets, much like Ford did with its subcompact crossover SUV EcoSport.

Electric is the future. But is that future now? Or even the day after tomorrow?

The story is the same across the world, forcing Ford and General Motors to put brakes on their electrification plans. While Germany ended EV subsidies last December after spending 10 billion euros since 2014 by partially funding purchases of over 1 million cars, France excluded Chinese-made cars from rebates around the same time. This even impacted Tesla's Made-in-China Model 3, though the Model Y SUV produced in Germany was kept off the scrapping list. The 'range anxiety' is no less in the US, where vehicle inventories with auto dealers reached a record 4-month high during the last Christmas holiday season.

This upend or consumer weariness is reflected in Tesla's latest financials. Tesla is estimated to have sold over 50% of EVs in the US last calendar year, as well. Income from operations is down 47% from the prior-year quarter. Worryingly, operating margins of 8.2% for Q4 2023 are half of the fourth quarter of 2022. The stock is down 32% year-to-date.

When the same Musk who once joked on SNL, 'I reinvented electric cars… Did you think I was going to be a chill, normal dude?' forewarned analysts in January of a 'notably slower' growth outlook of 2024 instead of the earlier envisaged 50% average annual growth, it's evident the EV euphoria has been short-circuited, at least for now.

As spotty charging infra trips up mega ambitions, perhaps the bigger beneficiary of the electric buzz will be another company whose initials also start with the same letter T: Toyota, by doubling down on 'headache-free' hybrids has made them far more mainstream.

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THE SPEAKING TREE

Leading With Security

RAJIV VIJ

Despite success, many business leaders feel insecure within. They experience the imposter syndrome — the feeling that they are not good enough for their role. Some are insecure about their educational or professional background, others about their lack of gravitas. Many are anxious about the narrowing opportunities at the top of the pyramid; others about staying relevant after retiring from a high-powered role. Invariably, our insecurities are a symptom of a deeper unfulfilled emotional need to be accepted, respected or loved. However, we grow up confusing success with security.

Secure leaders don't identify excessively with their professional role. They don't link their sense of self-worth with success at work. They realise that their work is not who they are. They have a greater sense of self-acceptance and self-love. Instead of routinely judging themselves, they choose to be kinder to themselves. Further, they are clear about their life purpose and stick to pursuing intrinsic goals — which are an authentic expression of who they are. This further validates and affirms their emotional self.

Instead of micromanaging their team, secure leaders are more empowering. Instead of seeking perfection in themselves and others, they are better at prioritising the strategic and the important. They are not anxious to prove their worth in a new role and, hence, don't easily feel overwhelmed. Leaders who are secure within are not only passionate about their purpose and goals but are also better at decision-making and risk-taking. They tend to be happier, less stressed and more at peace.

BLISS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Watching a Street Play

Imagine this: you are walking through a busy office area and suddenly notice a street play in progress. The pleasure of watching a street play differs from watching one inside a hall. It is a delightful excursion into the world of live theatre, infused with the vibrancy and immediacy of the urban landscape.

The beauty of street plays is that they bring theatre to the masses, breaking down barriers of access and cost. Set in public spaces, they welcome all, inviting audiences from diverse backgrounds to come together and enjoy the performance free of charge. This inclusivity fosters a sense of belonging and unity among viewers, creating a shared



experience that bridges socio-economic divides.

Additionally, the spontaneity and energy of street theatre add to its appeal. Performers interact directly with the audience, blurring the lines between actor and spectator, creating a dynamic, interactive experience. The bustling backdrop of city life serves as the stage, infusing each performance with excitement and unpredictability. It is more than just a form of entertainment; it's a celebration of art, activism and communal spirit.

JUST IN JEST

A BSF band in black suits, white shirts, red ties, on Holi? Seriously?

A Bit of Colour Would Go a Long Holi Way

The internet is right — India is not for beginners. The more things change here, the more we seem to cling to old stuff. In 2022, GoI dropped the genuinely popular and moving tune 'Abide With Me' from the Beating Retreat ceremony that was part and parcel of the repertoire since 1950, because it wanted to include non-English Indian songs. Earlier this year, the Indian Navy changed protocol to allow officers and sailors to wear kurta-pajamas in officers' messes and sailor institutes, as part of GoI's initiative to 'Indianise' military customs.

But come this Holi, netizens spotted a video of a BSF team organising a Holi mela in Srinagar. And, as is practice, the house band was playing some popular tunes for those who attended. So far so good. But what was the full team wearing for the Holi mela? Believe it or not, black suits, white shirts and — wait for it — red ties! It almost seemed that the team forgot it was Holi, which is all about non-subdued colours. Did the BSF band — also looking very, very sombre — think they were attending a board meeting of a PSU? How on earth can one celebrate spring in a black suit, white shirt and — yes — red tie? Next time, someone needs to remind BSF that Holi is *not* a red-tie event, leave the suits at home and embrace technicolour. And who wants ties — red or otherwise — to be tied to the past?

Why US Allows Pak Double Games

Seema Sirohi

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

Where does Pakistan figure these days in the US scheme of things? Yes, it remains important, but for all the wrong reasons — a collapsing economy, radicalised populace, inflamed border with Afghanistan, vault full of terrorist groups and, not to forget, an arsenal of nuclear weapons.

Donald Lu, State Department's lead officer for South and Central Asia, told a House subcommittee hearing last week, 'We have deep national security interests with Pakistan, not least of which is the fight against terrorism.' Political and economic stability of Pakistan is important for Washington. This is what the Pakistani establishment wanted to hear, and Lu leaned in, sometimes getting overly personal about his Pakistan connection.

But there was no hint of a reset or resumption of military aid. As for help with IMF, Pakistan needs to meet conditions for a longer-term bailout after the standby agreement for $3 bn signed last year runs out in April. The economy is in such dire straits, the main objective of army chief Asim Munir's 10-day visit last December was financial help, not a list of 'most wanted' weapons. The US side seemed to agree as Pakistan embarked on yet another voyage of discovery.

It's been a while since the Pakistani establishment has felt 'wanted' by Washington. The last big splash on US shores was in 2019 when Donald Trump received Imran Khan at the White House. It's been downhill ever since. When Joe Biden took office, he didn't even bother to call Khan, abandoning tradition with aplomb while Khan and his advisers waited by the phone.

Biden also decided to get out of Afghanistan, robbing Pakistan of considerable leverage, to say nothing of the rent. As Taliban took over Kabul, Khan declared Afghans had broken the 'shackles of slavery'. That won him no friends as his loud anti-Americanism pushed Pakistan further down the US agenda. The White House had more important objectives to pursue, which meant the State Department was in charge, where the last of the Pakistan enthusiasts reside.



Too close for comfort

The next two years saw Khan's hubris on full display, the army's machinations to sideline and jail him, an imploding economy, the Taliban coming out of 'strategic depth' and turning from faux friend to real foe and the crafting of a new coalition government. That there was massive electoral manipulation is not in doubt, but how to rationalise it became the question.

Khan's Pakistani American supporters want an accounting of why their supreme leader was robbed of his crown. They hope their exertions would force a reckoning in Washington, which is unlikely. But they did build enough pressure to get a campaign going on Capitol Hill. Last month, 31 members of the House wrote to Biden, calling for an investigation into 'pre- and post-poll rigging' and listing all the ways Khan's party was denied a level playing field. Pro-establishment Pakistani Americans, who are comfortable with whatever the army dishes out, got nervous. They asked leading questions of the letter writers — wouldn't an independent investigation into election irregularities amount to meddling in Pakistan's internal politics?

They needn't have worried — there's little appetite in Washington for an activist Pakistan policy. The minimum is the maximum. The subcommittee hearing with Lu as the sole witness is a case in point. Was it the lack of interest that no outside experts were called or ennui that now pervades the US-Pakistan relationship? Lu was careful and it was clear he didn't want to say anything that might spark a new conspiracy theory.

Pakistan remains an important US partner and a major non-Nato ally for all practical purposes, practical being the operative sentiment. The US needs eyes and ears to monitor terrorist groups, especially Al-Qaeda and offshoots of IS. And ISI knows the game — it can deliver at the right time.

A more immediate issue for the US is trying to protect Afghan refugees after Pakistan announced it would expel an estimated 1.7 mn undocumented Afghans, ostensibly to curb terrorism. Many Afghans with special immigrant visas for the US are in Pakistan awaiting final clearances. After a disastrous withdrawal, the Biden administration is trying to bring as many Afghan interpreters and contractors who helped the US military during the war.

The overall US policy remains 'rinse and repeat' despite Pakistan's habitual double games, decades of deception, role in the killing of US soldiers and hosting of Osama bin Laden. Mere mortals might ask why. Two main reasons: Pakistan's nukes and a superpower's capacity to absorb a lot of you-know-what.

Chat Room

Electric Policy for Eclectic Vehicle

Apropos the Edit, 'What to Make of America's EV Lifting' (Mar 25), rolling out green policy is one thing, and implementing it in letter and spirit is another. Just like in India, US, too, does not have a robust charging infrastructure, which is the biggest roadblock in EV adoption. In addition, if incentives like tax credit are not addressed to the end user's satisfaction, it will further deter the consumer from replacing her ICE vehicle with an EV. Donald Trump, if he's elected, may have a change of heart on EV policy, but that alone will not suffice. US, India or any other country that wishes to pursue an EV policy in the truest sense must bring all stakeholders on the same page, enable a complete ecosystem and pursue clear goals.

BAL GOVIND
Noida



CONTRAPUNTO

The basis of optimism is sheer terror

–OSCAR WILDE

Too Big To Check?

Regulatory actions against Big Tech don't effectively cover areas that allow them to create an oligopoly

It's been an eventful week in the world of Big Tech regulation. EU launched sweeping investigations into the activities of three of them, Apple, Alphabet and Meta, to check if they are complying with the area's Digital Markets Act (DMA). Independently, in US, Florida has introduced a law that bans children under 14 from social media platforms.

The problem | Big Tech represents an inversion of the early ideas of competition. Global tech industry's appeal lay in the fact that entry barriers to competition couldn't be lower. A college dropout with a killer idea and the smarts could reduce an industry leader to an also ran. That's now history.

Power of concentration | Digital economy is driven by economies of scope. That is, providing a variety of services makes a firm more competitive by giving it access to a huge trove of data. AI is nothing without extraordinarily large data sets and computing power. So, now, folks with killer ideas are pushed into the embrace of Big Tech. Think of the grip Microsoft has on OpenAI. Big Tech now dominates three crucial areas, AI, platform economies and social media. The challenge for regulators is to find a framework that can effectively address the full range of Big Tech operations.



DMA and gatekeeper approach | EU's DMA is the world's most ambitious regulatory effort to rein in Big Tech. It identified a handful of companies as gatekeepers and held them to high standards. On March 25, it launched its first non-compliance investigations to check if the three companies are using market dominance to choke potential competition. DMA represents an extension of earlier regulatory efforts to curb anti-competitive practices of Big Tech. It's an area where most regulators have made progress.

Regulatory gaps persist | Florida's law tackles a small part of a critical problem posed by social media. It's another matter that bans of the kind planned are hard to impose. Social media is also a platform that allows firms to suck in data. It's put them in pole position to harvest early gains from application of AI in mass products.

Getting back to the past | Silicon Valley's outsized global influence creates resentment. But in its favour was the belief that it was a true meritocracy. That's now morphed into a conventional oligopoly. The regulatory challenge now is helping the tech industry get back to its roots.

Pak Of Trouble

Beijing is realising being pals with Islamabad is costly. Not a surprising result when you back a terror state

Pakistan's security problems are again worsening. But this time the Chinese are burning their fingers too. Monday's strike, where militants from Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) tried to storm Pak navy base PNS Siddique in Balochistan's Turbat, took place within a week of an attack on Gwadar port complex. The common link? China. Gwadar is the centrepiece of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, while the naval base was reportedly hosting Chinese drones.

Risky business | Yesterday, five Chinese nationals were killed by a suicide bomber in northwest Pakistan. This clearly shows all is not well with CPEC projects that have increasingly come to be seen as robbing Pakistan's poor for the benefit of military elite. Minerals-rich Balochistan has long complained about Islamabad's imperialistic treatment. Now the anger is directed at generals' best friend Beijing. While Pak army does provide security for CPEC projects, this hasn't stopped attacks.



Double game? | But Pakistan is a master at using terrorism for leverage. BLA has been a thorn in Islamabad's side for years. Yet, if it keeps the Chinese on tenterhooks, that's leverage the generals wouldn't mind when they are taking on billions of dollars in Chinese loans.

Double trouble | This too-clever-by-half strategy of course leads to costs. Supping with terrorists has cost Pakistan a huge number of civilian lives. Along with BLA, Pak Taliban too has increased frequency of attacks since termination of ceasefire with Islamabad in Nov 2022. So much for the generals' 'brilliant' strategy of grooming Afghan Taliban for strategic depth.

Losing face and more | Despite generals calling the shots, China knows it won't ever get its money back. But it doesn't want to lose face by admitting it. Beijing is realising that its all-weather friend is all-weather trouble. India should continue to keep its guard up and prevent any spillovers of Pak terror. If the Beijing-Islamabad nexus weakens, it's good for New Delhi.

Tea and sympathy

When you enjoy your morning cup of chai, you should say 'Thank you' to the Brits

Jug Suraiya



If you're savouring a cup of tea while reading this newspaper, you should thank the British for having brought both chai and Angrezi to India where we've transformed the beverage and the language to suit our tastes, infusing them with home-grown masala.

The story of how Camellia Sinensis, the botanical name of the tea plant, came to be cultivated in India reads like thriller fiction.

Indeed, in his 1966 epic novel, *Tai Pan*, about the founding of Hong Kong as a British outpost, James Clavell used as a subplot the smuggling out to India of tea seeds from China, a practice strictly forbidden by Chinese law.

European travellers to India in the mid-17th century recorded the use of tea as a medicinal drink in parts of Assam, but the plant was not widely cultivated, nor commonly used.

From the early 19th century on, Britain had become an enthusiastic tea-drinking nation, its popularity initially confined to the affluent, but gaining appeal among the working class, not least because the necessity of boiling the brew made the unclean water safer to drink.

secondopinion

For the tea they drank, the British had to pay the Chinese in bullion. This would have beggared Britain, except that the Chinese were willing to pay in bullion for opium, the poppies for which were grown in Bengal. Though opium was illegal in China, it was smuggled in by the British to pay for their tea.

When the Chinese authorities resisted, it led to two so-called Opium Wars, to subjugate China and, in effect, turn it into a nation of druggies.

Then, in 1851, an enterprising British functionary, appropriately named Robert Fortune, managed to sneak out 20,000 Chinese seedlings. Planted in the Darjeeling hills, these flourished, and the tea trade grew bigger than ever as Indians too took to the brew, though with the addition of ginger and other spices.

The teacup you hold has quite a storm of history in it. Not least for having given us our own version of America's great success story, From Log Cabin to White House: From 'Chaiwalla' to PM.

Rich In Drama, Poor In Numbers

Piketty co-authored World Inequality Lab study says 'India stands out as a very unequal country'. But it's based on data their earlier study scored low on transparency. How does this work?

Atanu Biswas



In a recently released working paper co-authored by economist Thomas Piketty, Paris-based World Inequality Lab (WIL) estimated India's income and wealth inequality during 1922-2023. It said that following Independence, inequality declined until the early 1980s, after which it began to rise and has skyrocketed since the early 2000s.

The study's primary goal is to estimate India's inequality levels (as of 2022) from a global perspective. The study says that income share of the top 10%, and top 1%, in India in 2022-23 are 60%, and 22.6%, respectively, both remarkably high. One may recall the enormous commotion WIL's 'World Inequality Report 2022' caused in Dec 2021 worldwide, including in India. The tone of both studies is somewhat similar. Consequently, the report and current paper should perhaps be studied together.

Whose data is it? | "India stands out as a poor and very unequal country, with an affluent elite," the 2022 Report stated. It said income share for the top 10% was 57.1%, and the top 1% had 21.7%. These numbers closely resemble the equivalent numbers from the current study. But, as a statistician, I'm concerned with the data, sampling plans, and methodologies used to produce these estimates.

One can wonder how the income distribution was estimated in the first place, given India doesn't have any official income surveys. Did they make a lot of assumptions while using auxiliary data?

Data on consumption following the 68th cycle of the NSSO Household Consumer Expenditure Surveys in 2011-12, was the last publicly available consumption survey government data, until about a month ago, when Household Consumption Expenditure Survey 2022-23 was released.

Method in the rad-ness? | Further, because the 2022-23 statistics employed a *different methodology* than the earlier survey, they perhaps *cannot be compared directly*. And there's always room to challenge the methodology, coverage, design, and quality of the survey data from various private organisations. Hence, estimates based on such secondary data are likely to be erroneous. Moreover, margin of error is also unknown.

To produce a long-term homogenous series of income and wealth inequality in India, the current study combined "national income accounts, wealth aggregates, tax tabulations, rich lists, and surveys on income, consumption, and wealth in a consistent framework." In the 2022 report, in order to harmonise, analyse, and disseminate comparable international inequality data, collaboration with statistical institutions, tax authorities, universities, and international organisations was made. It acknowledged they "lack basic information about inequality".

Mind the math | The pre-tax income inequality series (g-percentile shares, averages, and thresholds), up to 2019, were taken into consideration, in accordance with World Inequality Database's general policy.



NUMBER GAMES: Of course, we have removed poverty. If we had not, would all these luxury apartments, five-star hotels, super bazaars, etc. come up?

By assuming pre-tax income distribution remains constant during 2015-19, and that all income g-percentiles increase at the average per adult national income growth rate, the Indian pre-tax income inequality series during 2015-19 is derived from a simple growth-neutral extrapolation.

Now this may not always be a very reasonable assumption.

Further, a comparable income inequality series from 2014-15 until 2022-23 was constructed similarly for the current study, acknowledging severe data challenges, including absence of key data sources.

Glitchy India numbers | Now, the Indian data's Transparency Index was given a relatively low score (5.5 out of 20) in the World Inequality Report 2022. In that case, how justifiable is it to draw a significant conclusion from *that* data? To what extent are estimates likewise accurate for other countries? How accurate are the analogies, then?

Undoubtedly, inequality is widening both in India and globally, and the pandemic worsened it. People know that from experience, and WIL's work certainly indicates similarly. Everywhere, including India, the number of billionaires is rising. WIL's study described India experiencing a 'Billionaire Raj', with the number of billionaires in 2022 being over three times as many as in 2011.

Tax the rich? | The paper also proposes imposing a super tax on Indian billionaires and multi-millionaires and changing the tax system to account for both wealth and income. These are by no means novel. At a recent meet of world leaders, in-between nibbles of Swiss chocolate in Davos, over 250 billionaires and millionaires even signed an open letter advocating for wealth taxes to fund public services globally.

In *It's OK to Be Angry About Capitalism*, Bernie Sanders proposes an even more radical solution: Washington should confiscate 100% of any money earned by Americans over $999 million.

Demand the data | So, what about the real numbers to reflect inequality in India? With such imputed data of questionable quality, is it possible to accurately quantify them, as well as the errors, to predict inequality measures? It's certainly possible actual inequality is what these analyses show. However, it could even be significantly worse, or better.

Imprecision hurts | With this kind of data at hand, it's a daunting task to predict the precise situation, so the current estimates should better be viewed as a general indication of trends. But such imprecise estimates cause much controversy.

It's said such studies are an attempt to portray ongoing and expanding inequality. Yes, they are. But as a statistician, I say there are situations when 'no data' is better than 'bad data' and 'no estimate' is preferable to weird estimates. Instead, seek better data and/or updated measurements of inequality.

The writer is professor, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

Funding Politics: Many Ideas, No Takers

Analysis on electoral bond data won't answer the question of regulation. But no party really wants it. Only voters can change this

Trilochan Sastry



The electoral bonds data in public domain, with secret numbers readable only by ultraviolet light, will continue to be parsed and investigated. But, we also need to, now, think beyond EBs. From its introduction to its cancellation, the road EBs took has made it clear that political party funding reforms are an absolute imperative.

Three principles guide overall political party and campaign funding. At the outset, there should be no foreign money and no black money.

Favours Inc | Second, 'quid pro quo', where donations are given for gaining favours from govt needs to be minimised, for which, a basic requisite is complete transparency.

Quid pro quo could mean govt contracts, permitting illegal activities like sand and granite mining, gambling, and manufacture and supply of illicit liquor. It could mean tax benefits to large companies, or changes in policies and laws to benefit large donors, or giving environmental clearances – favours may be against public interest.

In the case of EBs, quid pro quo, if any, needs to be investigated, especially in govt contracts. Did any of the donors get such contracts? Donors are largely real estate and infra companies. It remains to be investigated whether they obtained govt contracts against donations.

Also, the link if any between CBI and ED raids and donations through electoral bonds needs to be established.

Compliance, key | The third principle is a level-playing field. So much money is required to contest elections that about 99% of citizens cannot afford it. To what extent a level-playing field is possible, or desirable, also needs to be discussed. But if there *is* to be a level-playing field, we need realistic spending limits, strictly enforced. Further, we need to enforce transparency in spending limits.

Most of Europe and some US states have a certain level of public funding. But for this to be a reality in India, we need to enforce transparency in spending limits, remove black money and stop bribing of voters.

Transparency, transparency | The best international practice in other democracies is transparency in party and candidate funding. There are funding limits on companies and individuals. Apple Inc, with a $3 trillion market cap, can fund the entire US presidential, Congress and Senate elections. This power is curtailed by imposing limits on corporate as well as individual donations.



What does EB data reveal? That vast majority of donors were businesses, 90% of which were private limited, whose finances aren't publicly available. The biggest donor is a gambling company. The second and third largest are also privately held companies, which means we don't know how much profits they made. Only the top donor Future Gaming gave funds to all top five political parties.

It's worth reiterating that only a few of the large donors are publicly listed. It remains to be seen if they donated through the older system of direct online transfer or through Electoral Trusts. Notably, India's biggest publicly listed companies are missing from the list of EB donors.

Other than BJP, the only other national party with significant EB donations is Congress. Trinamool, YSRCP and DMK as regional parties got huge donations compared to their states' population. Congress fared badly – most of their donations were from smaller companies.

We also have several non-political organisations that campaign for political parties or even candidates. Their campaign expenses need to be counted towards election expenses and made public, as is required in other countries.

Black money scouts | Electoral bonds weren't able to curb black money. They were introduced in early 2018, and during 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Election Commission seized a record amount of cash.

Nearly all donations through EBs are from unknown private companies. Hardly any amount is from the large corporate houses and from individuals. Black money can be curbed only by direct seizure before elections by ED, CBI and I-T authorities.

What it took for EB data to be made public was a glimpse of the slow road to funding reforms. After both lists were made public, one with unique numbers of 20,421 EBs purchased, and the other, separately, of political parties that received bonds along with the numbers, it took journalists and analysts countrywide barely hours to match. It's worth noting SBI asked for time till mid-June 2024 to do this matching.

There are tough questions, and many discussions and a clear understanding of all implications are needed. Various govts appointed committees on this and related issues – most recent was the Law Commission on Electoral Reforms, which submitted its report in 2015. There are earlier reports as well.

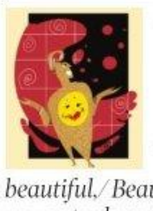
There's no lack of recommendations. But govts aren't willing to act. Perhaps the demand must come from a fully aware public. The vexed question of political funding regulation remains. It requires a much larger consultation between voters, Election Commission and political parties.

The writer is chairman, Association for Democratic Reforms

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace



Life is what happens to you,/ While you're busy making other plans./ Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,/ Beautiful boy,/ Before you go to sleep,/ Say a little prayer,/ Every day/ In every way,/ It's getting better and better...

John Lennon

When Life Is Much More Than A Dream

Narayani Ganesh

I received Holi greetings from a former colleague and friend, after years. He had moved to another job early, and kept in touch sporadically. I messaged a greeting in return and asked, "So, are you still working or have you retired?" To which he replied, "i am working to retire." His response made me smile, but reading it repeatedly, came the realisation that yes, many of us work hard and save to provide for post-retirement years. It's not just about financial security; we plan on making good use of the time we will have on our hands, read books, watch movies, eat out, meet friends, sleep lots, pursue long-forgotten hobbies, maybe do some seva and generally chill. In short, lead a full life by doing all that we missed out on.

Post-retirement, the enthusiasm may not have diminished too much, but the body doth protest. One is no longer physically agile as one thought one could be, may get tired easily and for some, there is a sense of loss, of not going to work every day and meeting up with colleagues and deadlines.

Then there are those who just love the thought of doing absolutely nothing, brushing aside warnings that one's mind and body may atrophy. They delight in the thought of never having to go to work again. At a retirement party some years ago, the gentleman who was gifted a pen and watch by the organisation he worked for, smiled and asked, "And pray, what will i do with these, now that i am retired?"

THE SPEAKING TREE

The trend today is to plan for either early retirement, say in the 40s, or make room for experiencing post-retirement benefits even during a busy working life by carving out time and opportunities during weekends, striking a work-life balance. Sardar Khushwant Singh would quote Mary Wollstonecraft while musing on the evening of one's life:

"It appears to me impossible that i should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should be only organised dust-ready to fly abroad the moment the spring snaps, or the spark goes out, which kept it together. Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable – and life is more than a dream."

Metaphysically speaking, life ought to indeed be more than a dream. The Mandukya Upanishad says that the waking state lets us experience the world in a limited way through our bodily senses; it is only when we sleep deeply that dreams help us enter a different world where imaginative perceptions take over, enlarging the field of experience. The dream state is described as antahprajnya, inward knowing; pravivikta, subtle, and taijasa, burning. In this state, imagination takes over and what you think and feel in your mind is not predicated on the external world's objects.

Old perceptions are 'burnt' and there is a mix of gross and subtle perceptions that present a wider picture. When you transcend the waking, sleeping, dreaming states, you start to become aware that life is more than what you see and experience. You reach a state that can be described as neither mental nor physical. It is more than objects, more than dreams.

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Gaza ceasefire

UN resolution lays bare cracks in US-Israel ties

THE UN Security Council on Monday passed a resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza during the month of Ramzan, the unconditional release of hostages and urgent efforts to expand the flow of aid into the war zone. There were 14 votes in favour of the resolution, even as the US abstained, deciding not to use its veto power. Stung by the turn of events, Israel has accused its all-weather ally of abandoning it. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made his displeasure evident by cancelling an Israeli delegation's visit to the US.

The resolution might be non-binding, but the US decision not to veto it indicates differences between Washington and Tel Aviv. The US has claimed that there is no change in its policy on the matter, but that is not enough to pacify Israel. The Joe Biden administration has been supplying Israel with vital military aid and supporting its goal of destroying Hamas, but at the same time it has expressed concern over the mounting civilian casualties. The nearly six-month-old war has claimed the lives of over 32,000 Palestinians in the Israeli retaliation for the October 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas-led militants.

Regrettably, both warring sides have hardened their stance, with Hamas rejecting the latest proposal put forward by international mediators for a ceasefire and hostage release and Israel tearing into the UN Security Council resolution. According to Israel, the resolution has emboldened Hamas by suggesting that international pressure would bring the war to an end without the militant group having to make concessions. There is no doubt that Israel is becoming increasingly isolated in the global arena and can no longer take US support for granted. The time is ripe for the international community to up the ante against Israel so that it takes its foot off the pedal and gives peace a chance in Gaza.

Gambling menace

Suicide shows predatory tactics of betting rings

THE recent suicide by a young Karnataka woman due to her husband's involvement in online cricket betting highlights the grim consequences of entering this dark world. Ranjitha's death serves as a stark reminder of the devastating impact that addiction to betting can have on families. Her husband Darshan Babu, an engineer, fell prey to the allure of easy money promised by betting on Indian Premier League matches. Duped by advertisements claiming that the risk was minimal, Darshan soon found himself trapped in a cycle of debts, which mounted to over Rs 1.5 crore. His descent into financial ruin not only jeopardised his own wellbeing but also that of Ranjitha, who succumbed to the relentless harassment inflicted by creditors.

The harrowing circumstances surrounding her death shed light on the predatory tactics employed by those running illicit betting rings. Exploiting individuals with false promises and coercive measures, these unscrupulous elements profit at the expense of vulnerable individuals. There is a dire need to check the proliferation of online gambling and save unsuspecting people from falling into this trap. The scale of the racket can be gauged from the Mahadev betting ring exposed by the Enforcement Directorate last year, wherein the agency has frozen or attached promoters' assets worth nearly Rs 1,300 crore.

The government's recent efforts to regulate online gaming and crack down on illegal gambling activities are commendable. Citing the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, an advisory issued to social media influencers, cautioning them against endorsing offshore betting platforms, underscores the importance of ethical practices and aims to prevent the normalisation of gambling-related activities. Public awareness campaigns, counselling and stricter enforcement of laws prohibiting gambling are essential components of a much-needed holistic approach to combating this all-pervasive problem.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, MARCH 27, 1924

Punjab Budget

THE greater portion of the last session of the Punjab Legislature was occupied with the discussion of Budget grants. It was most unfortunate that except on a few occasions, there was no concerted action on the part of elected members to carry the motions for reduction even when they were eminently reasonable and desirable. On the other hand, there was an unmistakable tendency on the part of a large body of Muslim members to cut short the discussion by moving a closure and blindly support the Government on all matters which did not directly affect Mahomedan or rural interests. Hindu and urban members, both Swarajists and others, however, always sided with their other colleagues in the matters that principally affected the latter. For instance, the opposition to the land settlements would have ended in smoke but for the support it got from non-Muslim urban members. The elected Sikh members' attitude was praiseworthy throughout the session, and on all matters of public importance, their votes were cast on the right side, even though in the matter of the Akali trial and other matters on which they were keen, the Mussalman members voted against them almost in a body. Another noticeable feature of the proceedings was the anxiety of Hindu and Sikh members to scrupulously refrain from making a frontal attack on the frankly pro-Muslim policy of the Education Minister. As against this, several Mussalman members, on more than one occasion, almost deliberately sought to give a communal colour to the debates, and when that was not thought possible or expedient, tried to raise the cry of rural versus urban. This device was quite frequently adopted to affect the voting.

India can play peacemaker in Ukraine

New Delhi has greater credibility than Beijing as an interlocutor with both warring parties



MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER RESEARCH FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI



STEADFAST: Despite Western pressure, India has refused to acquiesce to the sanctions on Russia. REUTERS

LAST Wednesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke separately on the phone to two Presidents — Russia's Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy. His message was that there was a need for "an early end to the ongoing conflict".

Reports say that the first call was to Putin to congratulate him on his re-election as the President and this was followed by the call to Zelenskyy, expressing India's desire to "do everything within its means to support a peaceful solution" to the Ukraine issue.

The tone and tenor of both conversations, as reported by their respective governments or through posts by the principals on X (formerly Twitter), suggest that Modi and India remain credible interlocutors with both Russia and Ukraine and could emerge as peacemakers in the war that has deeply damaged both countries and has had negative global consequences.

Earlier, there had been initiatives by Turkey and China to promote a ceasefire and negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, but little came out of them. But the situation now has changed. The Russians are on the offensive, while support to Ukraine is wavering in the US and Europe. The prospect of a Donald Trump victory is compounding this situation, given what many believe is his inclination to stop additional expenditure in backing Kyiv.

In these circumstances, Modi's suggestion that India may be willing to play a role in bringing the conflict to a close is a significant one. Having headed India for the past decade, Modi is now an established international figure, especially since his government has adopted foreign policy positions that would add heft to a peacemaking initiative.

From the outset, India has adopted a path of a 'Russia-leaning' neutrality in the Ukraine war and despite Western pressure, refused to acquiesce to the sanctions on Russia. Indeed, it provided a lifeline of sorts for Moscow by purchasing ever larger quantities of its oil. Though it has faced criticism from the West and Ukraine, the current stalemate on the warfront has probably led to a reassessment of the Indian position in Kyiv. Recently, NSA Ajit Doval held telephonic consultations with Andriy Yermak, head of the Ukrainian President's office; later this week, New Delhi will host Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Both Ukraine and Russia have suffered huge losses and the war has reached a point where any kind of military breakthrough by either side looks like an unlikely prospect. According to some estimates, the Russian death toll is around 75,000, while Ukraine's fatalities are reportedly in excess of 60,000. They have also lost thousands of tanks, armoured combat vehicles, helicopters and artillery pieces.

> The path to a final settlement will be long and arduous, and perhaps India may find that it needs to play an even greater role.

Initial Russian bungling and Western help enabled Ukraine to recover large tracts of territory it had lost since February 2022. But now, advances have stalled and the Ukrainian counter-offensive of last summer did not achieve much. Currently, US aid remains blocked and this will impact Ukraine's ability to use superior Western equipment to offset Russian strength. The Europeans are scrambling to fill the gaps, but it will be years before they can be an effective replacement for the Americans.

By itself, Ukraine cannot indefinitely fight the Russians who, after initial blunders, have got their act together in terms of tactics and equipment. Their economy, which was predicted to collapse following Western sanctions, is doing well. With their larger manpower pool, they remain willing to expend more troops than Ukraine. A touch of war weariness has crept into Ukraine, which has no answer to the current Russian tactics.

The clamour for a negotiated settlement to the war is growing. This needs to take place when both adversaries are relative equals, rather than when one is clearly seen as being vanquished. As of now, it should be clear that the Ukrainians can fight on and despite all their shortages, the Russians have not found the going easy. But for how long and at what cost can this continue?

What the war has done is remove any doubt about the Ukrainian identity, which has now clearly emerged and taken a sharp anti-Russian turn. Effectively, it is the 'forward edge' of European defence against Russia.

In these circumstances, a possible settlement can be attempted. Perhaps the most dramatic suggestion came from Pope Francis, who urged Ukraine to have the courage to negotiate under the 'white flag'. Many US Republican Senators, including Marco Rubio, are also signalling that a negotiated settlement may be necessary to end the Ukraine war.

Both principals — Russia and Ukraine — reject negotiations at present. While Russia wants to end the war by freezing the ceasefire line, Ukraine, not surprisingly, rejects this. Currently, Russia controls 22 per cent of Ukrainian territory, including the land it occupied in 2014.

Switzerland has told the UN that it intends to organise a high-level Ukraine peace conference in the summer this year. While Ukraine has evinced interest in it, it is not clear whether Russia would be willing to participate. Reports suggest that the Swiss are roping in China to push Moscow to participate.

This is where India — and Modi — can play a major role in pushing both sides to attend the peace conference. Getting the conference going with both participating will be a beginning, and India certainly has much greater credibility as an interlocutor with the two parties than China. The path to a final settlement will be long and arduous, and perhaps New Delhi may find that it needs to play an even greater role. But the important point, as of now, is to make a beginning.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

"The war in Ukraine remains an open wound at the heart of Europe. —Antonio Guterres"

Protecting a penniless election candidate

KC VERMA

BEFORE the Representation of the People Act was amended in 1996, the law required countermanding of the election in a constituency if any contesting candidate died before polling. This provision created complications, especially when there were reasonable apprehensions that unlawful elements would harm candidates. The problem was worse when several independent candidates entered the fray, because each had to be provided protection, as happened in the 1992 Assembly elections in Punjab. It was in these elections that a labourer, whom we might call Kirorimal, was encouraged by his equally penniless friends to contest as an independent candidate. They assured him that some rich contestant would pay a fortune to make him withdraw from the fray.

Once he had filed his nomination, Kirorimal was assigned two constables, Surti and Hiralal, for protection. Sadly, there was no space for the cops in the shanty that he shared with five other labourers, and the constables could not take their charge to the police lines either. So, they decided to escort the labourer only during the day, when he went about earning his daily bread. The cops, however, were mortified to stand with Kirorimal at the 'labour chowk' every morning, as he waited to be hired for the day. The cops then had to hang around the whole day while Kirorimal went about digging earth, cleaning drains or doing whatever else he had been hired to do. There were days when Kirorimal got no employment at all. The three of them then roamed around in public parks or sat in some dhaba, where the cops paid for the food of their penurious protectee. Once they watched a film, but the cops resented paying for Kirorimal's cinema ticket.

Surti and Hiralal looked on enviously at their colleagues who were deputed to protect well-off contestants. Those lucky fellows whizzed past in cars or lolled around in palatial houses of the candidates. Surti and Hiralal were condemned to toiling in the sun, trudging behind Kirorimal as he went about seeking employment. Aware of their resentment, Kirorimal repeatedly assured them that it was only a matter of days before some rich contestant bribed him to withdraw. But no one made any offer.

Surti lost patience after a week of waiting every morning at the 'labour chowk'. He demanded that Kirorimal should withdraw from the election, but the labourer said he would do so only if he were paid twice the amount that he had paid as deposit. Surti then had a brainwave — he offered to hire Kirorimal to work in his fields in his native village. All three promptly proceeded to Surti's village, where the election candidate ploughed the fields every day. It was a win-win situation — Kirorimal got steady employment; Surti was able to get his field ploughed; both cops could discharge their duty in comfort and the independent candidate remained secure till the polling day!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Building on Bhutan bonhomie

Refer to the editorial 'PM's Bhutan visit'; PM Narendra Modi's visit to Bhutan and the fact that Thimphu's highest civilian honour was conferred on him highlight the mutual respect between the two countries. Such gestures reflect the two nations' willingness to support each other's aspirations. The doubling of New Delhi's aid for Thimphu's next Five-Year Plan will give a big boost to Bhutan's economy. It is noteworthy that India has always upheld Bhutan's territorial integrity. Since India's assistance to Bhutan is tied to its own security concerns, especially when it comes to tackling the Chinese influence in the region, Bhutan must reciprocate in ways that benefit both nations.

CHANCHAL S MANN, UNA

Strengthening bilateral ties

With reference to 'PM's Bhutan visit'; the fact that PM Narendra Modi chose to visit the Himalayan kingdom even though the country is in the poll mode highlights the significance of Bhutan in India's foreign policy. New Delhi is mindful of Thimphu's increased engagement with Beijing and the boundary agreement that they hope to forge soon. The China-Bhutan boundary talks are a matter of concern for India because of the Siliguri Corridor, which connects India's North East with the rest of the country. By continuing to strengthen its ties with Bhutan, India can also mend its rocky relations with other neighbours.

GREGORY FERNANDES, MUMBAI

Act against liquor manufacturers

Refer to the editorial 'Liquor tragedy'; it is a matter of grave concern that poisonous liquor claimed 21 lives in Punjab's Sangrur district. Such incidents have become increasingly common in the state. With elections around the corner, more such tragedies could unfold if the authorities fail to act fast. It is not uncommon for political parties to hand out liquor to gullible voters just to woo them. Such underhanded activities cannot be carried out without the connivance of local police officials or party candidates. The latest tragedy should serve as a wake-up call for the Bhagwant Mann-led government to tackle the burgeoning menace before it gets too late. Stringent action should be taken against the manufacturers of illicit liquor to stem the menace.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Bring culprits to book

Apropos of the editorial 'Liquor tragedy'; the loss of more than 20 lives in Sangrur is a stark reminder of the dire consequences of negligence and corruption on the part of the authorities. It shows the failure of the system to contain the illicit liquor trade in the region. The incident calls for prompt and stringent measures to check the menace. The arrest of some suspects in the case is a good start. But the rot runs deep, and there is a need to dismantle the entire nexus. Exemplary punishment should be given to the culprits.

SAHIBPREET SINGH, MOHALI

Hope for childless couples

Apropos of the article 'Make couples aware of risks involved in IVF'; there is no doubt that IVF has gained currency over the years because of delayed marriages, changes in lifestyle and medical complications. The technology has proved to be a boon for couples hoping to become parents. However, the age and health of the woman undergoing the process are sometimes neglected. The onus is on the government to make couples aware of the risks involved in the process. Besides, a couple or a family must make a responsible decision, keeping the health of the woman undergoing IVF treatment in mind.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, MOHALI

Educate public on risks of IVF

With reference to the article 'Make couples aware of the risks involved in IVF'; it is natural for a married couple to wish to have a child. There are numerous childless couples in the country dealing with infertility. The IVF method provides an opportunity or alternative for such couples. However, the risk to the life or health of a mother and child cannot be ruled out, especially if a couple opts to have a child at an advanced age. Most people in general are not aware of the upper age limit of 50 years for IVF treatment and the risks associated with it. It is imperative to educate the masses about the perils of becoming parents at an advanced age.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

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

Comprehensive law needed to regulate drones



KP SINGH
FORMER DGP, HARYANA

LAST week, a man from Himachal Pradesh's Kangra district was booked for flying an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) illegally for the supply of medicines. In February, a drone engaged in the home delivery of food items had crashed into an antenna on a rooftop in Gurugram, causing damage to a private property. Terrorists from across the international border use UAVs to drop arms and drugs in our territory. The police are not sure whether to shoot them down. On the other hand, the dropping of tear gas shells on farmers by the Haryana Police at the Punjab-Haryana border evoked sharp reactions from many quarters. All these incidents are proof that UAV-operating procedures are inadequate. Besides, it indicates a tardy implementation of the regulations.

The drone technology has provided easy solutions to many day-to-day administrative and policing problems, aerial photography and videography, transport management, construction support, telecom services, watershed management, disaster management, spraying of pesticides and nutrients on crops, last-mile delivery of services and goods in healthcare and retail logistics, border management and military operations in armed conflict zones.

The Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA) launched the 'Government Authorisation for Relief Using Drones' (GARUD portal) to fast-track the use of UAVs for aerial surveillance, aerial photography and public announcements during the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from government agencies, UAVs are also being employed by private players for promoting their commercial activities and for recreational purposes, necessitating close monitoring and regulation of drone operations.

The first regulation governing the application of UAVs in India, the Civil Aviation Requirements-2018 (CAR), was issued by the Director General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) under the Aircraft Act, 1934. On March 12, 2021, the CAR was replaced by the Unmanned Aircraft System Rules-2021 (UAS Rules). The UAS Rules prescribe basic regulations regarding the registration, licensing, data protection and privacy measures for operating UAVs. In August 2021, the UAS Rules-2021 were replaced with the liberalised Drone Rules-2021. Drone laws were also amended in 2022, 2023 and 2024 in order to keep pace with the growing demand among the people as well as the industry.



MULTIFACETED: Apart from government agencies, UAVs are also being employed by private players for commercial activities and recreational purposes, necessitating regulation of drone operations. ISTOCK

As per the regulations, drones are classified into five categories according to their weight: nano (weighing less than or equal to 250 gm), micro (between 250 gm and 2 kg), small (between 2 kg and 25 kg), medium (25-150 kg) and large (over 150 kg). Registration with the DGCA's Digital Sky platform is required for all drones, except the nano category.

For obtaining a remote pilot certificate (RPC) to operate UAVs, a candidate must be over 18 years of age and have passed Class X, apart from having completed a mandatory training course from a DGCA-approved institution. The RPC is not needed for operating nano drones and non-commercial micro drones weighing less than 2 kg. Such drones are not allowed to fly above 50 ft from ground level and at a speed of not more than 25 metres per second.

> Drones have huge potential in fast-growing economies and the job market, warranting due attention from policy-makers.

No drone can be allowed to fly above 400 ft vertically; the drone pilot must maintain a direct visual line of sight at all times during the flight. The MoCA has developed an interactive airspace map, indicating the 'no flying zone' and other boundary restrictions. UAVs are not allowed to fly over eco-sensitive zones and wildlife sanctuaries without the permission of the authorities; it is also prohibited to fly drones within a radius of 5 km from international airports and 3 km from other civil airports. Drones may be employed for commercial activities only under a permit from the DGCA.

All UAVs, except those falling under the nano category, should have third-party insurance on the pattern of motor vehicles to cover the damages in case of an accident. Operating UAVs while under the influence of alcohol or drugs is prohibited. Further, a drone should not be flown from a moving vehicle, ship or aircraft. Carrying or dropping hazardous material from UAVs is banned. Besides, drones should not be flown over a private property without permission from the owner. Any violation of the conditions for flying may attract penalties under Section 10-A of the Aircraft Act, 1934.

In April 2021, for the purpose of maintaining public order and peace, police forces in the country were exempted from the operation of the UAS Rules. It is yet to be legally examined if the exemption allows cops to drop tear gas shells on a crowd, as such shells fall under the category of ammunition and hazardous substances.

Drones are like the 'third eye in the sky'. Without adequate safeguards, the expanded use of UAVs and their integration into the national airspace raise a host of concerns with respect to the privacy of individuals. In the absence of legal safeguards, the apex court of France has ruled that the use of drones by the Paris police, even while enforcing Covid lockdown restrictions, was a violation of privacy and personal data protection laws. In England, the Drone and Model Aircraft Code prescribes norms to protect privacy while flying drones.

Until now, UAVs have been treated as a category of aircraft and governed by regulations made under the Aircraft Act, despite the fact that they are totally different in application and working. Drones have huge potential in fast-growing economies and the job market, warranting due attention from policy-makers. A comprehensive special law on all matters relating to drones along the lines of the Motor Vehicles Act is the need of the hour. All genuine concerns relating to privacy and data protection should be addressed by adhering to the requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality.

Multiplicity of agencies bodes ill for security at airports



MP NATHANAEL
FORMER IG, CRPF

LAST month, a mentally unstable man managed to sneak through layers of the security cordon at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai before being identified as an intruder by the airline staff members who were scanning the passengers set to board the flight. He closely tailed other passengers when the automatic e-gates opened and was thus able to evade detection by the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel on duty. It was by chance that nothing untoward happened, but the breach turned out to be an eye-opener for the security agencies to review and revise their apparatus in and around the airport.

Earlier, an intruder had entered the airfield by scaling the perimeter wall and reached the runway at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi a day after the 75th Republic Day celebrations. The intruder, who was found to be intoxicated, had been nabbed by the CISF and later handed over to the Delhi Police.

At the entrance to the airport, the CISF personnel check the air tickets and identity cards before allowing entry to the passengers. In normal course, it would appear impossible to sneak through the e-gates under the prying eyes of these personnel. Perhaps their dependence on the e-gates may have led to laxity in checking the tailing of a passenger by an intruder at the Mumbai airport. The boarding pass is again checked before the security check-in area. Even here, the intruder managed to dodge the security personnel to get across the e-gate by closely tagging along another passenger. Had it not been for the alert airline staff, the intruder would have entered the aircraft.

Till the mid-1970s, security at airports was not given much importance, though some semblance of security by the state police was in place. The first hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft, Fokker F27 Friendship, took place on January 30, 1971. Hijacked by two cousins from the outlawed National Liberation Front — later rechristened Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) — the flight from Srinagar to Jammu was flown to Lahore, where the passengers were made to deboard and the aircraft was set on fire.

Another Indian Airlines flight, bound from Srinagar to New Delhi, was hijacked by six JKLF terrorists on September 10, 1976. Though they wanted to be flown to Libya, the flight had to land in Lahore because of low fuel. Pakistani officials offered the hijackers drinks laced with intoxicants before overpowering them. The flight returned to Delhi.



PRIORITIES: Any attempt to cut down on the cost of deploying CISF personnel is fraught with huge risks. PTI

Taking the matter seriously, the government appointed the Pande Committee to look into the security aspects of the aviation sector in India. The panel recommended the setting up of a security cell within the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

The Montreal-London Air India 182 Kanishka flight that exploded over the Atlantic Ocean on June 23, 1985, spurred the upgradation of the security apparatus at airports and in aircraft. The Justice Kirpal Commission, which went into the lapses, observed that multiple failures had led to the terror act. Among the reasons cited were the inept handling of the explosive-laden baggage unaccompanied by the passenger who booked it, the failure of the baggage X-ray machine and the ineffectiveness of the handheld sniffers to detect explosives.

> The move to emulate the US Transport Security Administration, which is responsible for land, air and sea transport, is welcome.

In view of the increasing incidence of aircraft hijackings, India sent its representatives to the conference convened in Montreal for the adoption of the Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts of Violence at Airports Serving International Civil Aviation in February 1988. It has since been an active participant in the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

Consequent to the submission of the Justice Kirpal Commission report, the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS) was set up as an independent body on April 1, 1987. Headed by an IPS officer of the rank of Director General, it is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring foolproof security at all airports by framing 'standards and measures' for the security of civil flights at international and domestic airports. The bureau is also responsible for the implementation of the guidelines enumerated in Annexure 17 related to the security of airports of the Chicago Convention of the ICAO.

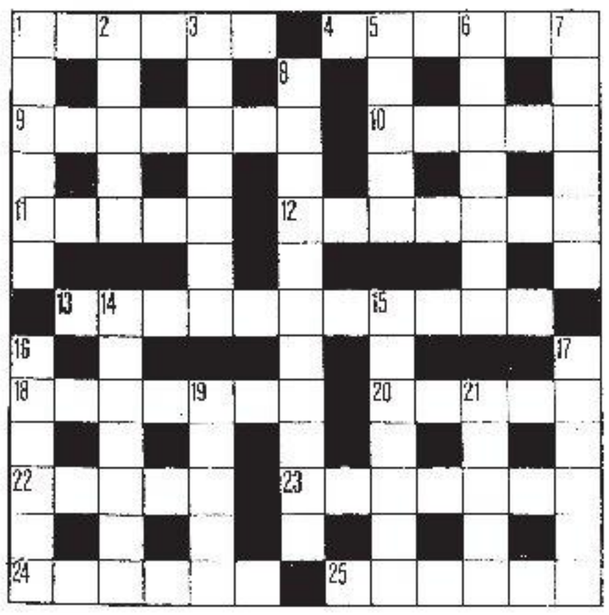
While the BCAS ensured security at airports by deploying the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) at sensitive ones and civil police in others, the hijacking of IC-814 on December 24, 1999, prompted the government to have a dedicated wing of the CISF for the security of airports. Barring a few, like the Srinagar, Leh and Jammu airports, which were manned by the CRPF, the CISF had taken over the security of all sensitive airports by 2011. In March 2020, the CISF took over from the CRPF too. In all, 16 flights were hijacked in India between 1971 and 2023. At present, CISF personnel are deployed at 66 of the 148 airports, while the remaining have been secured by the respective state police.

The deployment of private security agencies at sensitive airports was undertaken in accordance with the National Civil Aviation Policy (2016), whose Para 15(f) states that the "Government will encourage use of private security agencies at airports for non-core security functions which will be decided in consultation with the Ministry of Home Affairs." This attempt to cut down on the cost of deploying CISF personnel is fraught with huge risks. Being in the private agency's uniform, they would not carry the authority that CISF personnel do in dealing with the passengers. Though they would be trained and tested by the CISF, their capability and confidence would be no match for the regular CISF personnel.

The multiplicity of agencies in the security set-up would lead to the evasion of responsibility, which is detrimental to overall security. The Justice Kirpal Commission had stated in its report that the multiplicity of security agencies led to laxity.

The move to emulate the Transport Security Administration of the US, whereby a unified agency is entrusted with the responsibility of securing land, air and sea transport, is a step in the right direction. But until an agency of that nature takes over, the deployment of private security agencies can be perilous.

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Decisive moment (6)
4 Wonder (6)
9 Played at fast speed (2-5)
10 Give medical care to (5)
11 About (in date) (5)
12 Wide extent of land (7)
13 To stall (4,3,4)
18 Remain where one is (4,3)
20 Semi-aquatic furry animal (5)
22 The cream (5)
23 Throw off all restraint (3,4)
24 Tenacious (6)
25 Interrupt to harass a speaker (6)

DOWN

1 Brood of chicks (6)
2 Speak (5)
3 Guests (7)
5 Function improperly (3,2)
6 Country of southeast Asia (7)
7 Soapsuds (6)
8 Cooked exactly right (4,2,1,4)
14 Inclination (7)
15 Thrash (7)
16 To climb (6)
17 Twist in pain (6)
19 Bit (5)
21 Knack (5)

MONDAY'S SOLUTION

Across: 1 Ashamed, 5 Satyr, 8 Light-fingered, 9 Stand, 10 Entitle, 11 Endure, 12 Harass, 15 Brioche, 17 Decor, 19 Other way round, 20 Loyal, 21 Traitor.

Down: 1 Atlas, 2 High and mighty, 3 Matador, 4 Drivel, 5 Sight, 6 Turn to account, 7 Redress, 11 Embroil, 13 Andorra, 14 Recant, 16 Carol, 18 Rider.

SU DO KU

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

V. HARD

MONDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

MARCH 27, 2024, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1946
- Chaitra Shaka 7
- Chaitra Parvishte 14
- Hijari 1445
- Krishan PakshaTithi 2, up to 5:07 pm
- Vyagatha Yoga up to 10:53 pm
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 4:16 pm
- Moon in Libra sign
- Sant Tuka Ram Jyanti

FORECAST

SUNSET: WEDNESDAY 18:38 HRS
SUNRISE: THURSDAY 06:16 HRS

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	19
New Delhi	36	18
Amritsar	32	20
Bathinda	33	18
Jalandhar	31	18
Ludhiana	33	16
Bhiwani	33	19
Hisar	34	19
Sirsa	34	21
Dharamsala	22	14
Manali	18	07
Shimla	20	09
Srinagar	18	08
Jammu	30	17
Kargil	09	–02
Leh	10	–02
Dehradun	32	16
Mussoorie	22	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C

NEW DELHI | WEDNESDAY | MARCH 27, 2024

the pioneer

Opinion 06

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Much ado about nothing

Arvind Kejriwal governing from jail may look unconventional, but it is not unconstitutional

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is keeping his word so far: That he would rule the Capital from behind bars upon being arrested in the multicrore liquor scam. The issuance of Government orders from prison, however, has sparked a controversy. His political opponents, including the BJP, are raising concerns about the influence of criminal elements within the Government apparatus. The saga began when Kejriwal, also the national convener of AAP, was incarcerated following his alleged involvement in the liquor scam. Despite being in jail, he continued to issue orders related to governance matters in Delhi. This is unprecedented as no serving Chief Minister has ever been jailed. While Kejriwal's supporters argue that his actions demonstrate a commitment to his responsibilities, critics point to the broader implications of a jailed politician running a Government. BJP leaders have wasted no time in alleging that this development is emblematic of the pervasive influence of criminal elements. The BJP leaders assert that allowing individuals facing serious criminal charges to wield power from jail sets a dangerous precedent. Moreover, they argue that it raises questions about the efficacy of the justice system in curbing such abuses of power.



On the other hand, AAP supporters claim the BJP's allegations are aimed at tarnishing their party's image. They maintain that Kejriwal's actions are within bounds of his duties as Chief Minister and emphasise his commitment to serving the people of Delhi. Furthermore, they contend that Kejriwal's governance from jail reflects the resilience and determination of a leader who refuses to be deterred by legal challenges. In reality, the entire controversy is unfounded. If the Constitution permits an individual to retain a constitutional position while under judicial custody, it logically follows that they have the right to govern from wherever they are. Given its lack of prudence, it might appear unconventional, but it aligns perfectly with the constitutional framework of India's political system. Unlike Laloo Yadav and Hemant Soren, Kejriwal chose not to comply with the establishment's expectations by resigning and instead remained in his post. Additionally, being in judicial custody alone does not constitute a conviction or indictment, regardless of the strength of the allegations, and thus holds no legal validity. In the wake of the controversy surrounding Kejriwal's governance from jail, the next logical step for him would undoubtedly be to pursue avenues for securing bail. For a sitting Chief Minister to be in jail is an extraordinary circumstance, and Kejriwal's legal team will likely be working diligently to secure his release at the earliest opportunity. Amidst the heated exchange of accusations and counter-arguments, the broader implications of this controversy cannot be ignored. It highlights the complex interplay between politics, law enforcement and the justice system in India. As the debate rages on, it remains to be seen how this controversy will shape the political landscape in Delhi and beyond in the days to come.

PICTALK



Devotees carry Seethala Mallikarjuna Swamy's 'Rathotsava' towards Mullayanagiri hill, in Chikkamagaluru PTI

A showdown of arch-rivals



KALYANI **SHANKAR**

This electoral battle is shaping up to be a multi-party contest, primarily between the ruling BJP-led NDA and the INDIA bloc



Who will win the 2024 Lok Sabha polls? The election scene has become clear after the Chief Election Commissioner announced the poll schedule last week. They will begin next month and end on June 4, when the results will be announced.

It will be a multi-party contest, with the ruling BJP-led NDA alliance and the opposition coalition of the INDIA bloc being the primary contenders. Meanwhile, alliances are being built and major parties have announced the candidates. Party hopping and secret deals are also going on. Prime Minister Modi aims to perform a hat trick. Currently, it is a one-horse race, with the BJP dominating and the opposition parties trailing behind.

The Opposition INDIA coalition comprises 26 parties. They have formed a pre-poll alliance to challenge the BJP. It aims to field a single opposition candidate against the BJP in the upcoming elections. The Opposition suffered two consecutive defeats in 2014 and 2019, significantly damaging its image. It needs to connect with voters, including millennials.

Congress, leading the Opposition, is a 138-year secular party that used to represent marginalised groups like SCs, STs, OBCs and Muslims. It has been weakened since the eighties, with the rise of regional satraps and today, it is a mere shadow of its former strength. It lacks leadership.

After the 2014 and 2019 defeats, Congress now claims it is committed to social justice and empowering India's poor, oppressed, Dalits, farmers, youth and women with its five guarantees: Yuva Nyay, Bhagidaari Nyay, Naari Nyay, Kisan Nyay and Shramik Nyay.

The Opposition mainly aims to challenge Modi by consolidating anti-BJP votes and offering incentives. This strategy worked for Congress in recent Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Telangana Assembly polls, which Congress won. Congress hopes to gain from the BJP's anti-incumbency buffering sops and freebies. They also highlight Rahul Gandhi's recent Bharat Jodo Yatras, which was meant to connect with the people.

To succeed, Congress must raise bread-and-butter issues such as inflation, joblessness and social discord to engage with young voters who play a decisive role in elections. They must show an alternate strategy to appeal to them.

Simultaneously, some powerful chief ministers of state-level parties dominate their states, making it a tough fight for Prime Minister Narendra Modi in these areas.

2019, the BJP and its allies secured only 45 per cent of the votes. The remaining 55 per cent were up for grabs for the INDIA bloc. Although no national leader matches Modi's popularity, some influential regional leaders can sway voters in their respective regions. This is particularly true for West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. The biggest challenge for the coalition is to project a single leader against Modi. Unfortunately, there is an ego clash among the coalition partners, which makes it difficult to agree on someone.

Secondly, the BJP boasts a strong organisation with immense financial and political power. The Opposition doesn't seem to have a solid and compelling storyline, except for its commitment to safeguarding the Constitution and democratic values. However, voters are more concerned about basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter. For instance, Sonia Gandhi's Aam Admi slogan in 2004 resonated well with the masses. Low-income people generally live paycheck to paycheck and may not relate to abstract political concepts.

> WITH BOTH SIDES RAISING THEIR PITCH, THE 2024 ELECTIONS WILL SEE A NO-HOLDS-BARRED NEGATIVE CAMPAIGN, AS THIS WILL DECIDE THE FUTURE OF THE OPPOSITION AND THE AGGRESSIVE BJP

The Congress Party is still clinging to its glorious past and failing to acknowledge the current scene. As the second-largest Party, Congress automatically expects to lead the coalition. It has been losing its leaders to the BJP and a steady flow of these leaders demoralises the Party. The Opposition needs a solid counter to the BJP's propaganda and religious narrative. The BJP has grown since 1980; today, it is the biggest Party in India. It has a strong organisation with unlimited money power.

The Party seeks votes in the name of the Prime Minister. The BJP has a better chance of winning this time. The BJP's lucky mascot is Modi. His supporters consider him a doer due to the implementation of various measures. These include the Triple Talaq, CAA, revocation of Article 356 in Jammu and Kashmir and the inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The BJP highlights its achievements in the last decade and various welfare initiatives to attract voters. The continuity has helped Modi achieve his agenda. Modi has gained international recognition over the past ten years and ensured India's position at the high table, which excites his supporters.

On the negative side, the Opposition claims that the Modi Government has been targeting Opposition leaders and harassing them with Government probe agencies. The BJP poaches on other parties, lawmakers, and leaders. It has absorbed many second-rung leaders who chose to find better prospects in the saffron Party.

With both sides raising their pitch, the 2024 elections will see a no-holds-bar negative campaign, as this will decide the future of the Opposition and the aggressive BJP. Modi's secret to success is a divided opposition. As long as this continues, Modi will continue to win. The Opposition must chant the mantra of unity to win or even improve.

(The writer is a popular columnist; views are personal)

Water, an elixir of life and an agent of peace



BIJU **DHARMAPALAN**

Ineffective water management practices contribute to water scarcity by water loss, inefficient allocation and degradation of water resources

Water is an indispensable factor in the survival of humanity on this planet. For everything related to humans, we have one or other alternative. But for water, there is no alternative. Water is essential for life, playing a critical role in various bodily functions and processes. Science and religion have a consensus on one point. The first life on the planet originated in water. Water is often referred to as the "elixir of life" because it is essential for all living organisms' existence and survival. Without water, life as we know it would not be possible. All our civilizations and international co-operations have taken place through water bodies.

But the recent water shortage plaguing the silicon city of India, Bengaluru, has sent shocking waves among the city dwellers, who, despite having financial stability, are finding it difficult to get water for their daily use. If it's Bengaluru today, it will be in other cities shortly. According to a recent United Nations report, multiple zones within India's Indo-Gangetic basin have surpassed a critical level



of groundwater depletion, with the entire northwestern region projected to face significantly diminished groundwater resources by 2025.

Groundwater depletion occurs when the water extraction rate from aquifers exceeds the recharge rate, leading to a decline in groundwater levels over time. In the Indo-Gangetic basin, excessive groundwater pumping for irrigation, urban water supply, and industrial use has resulted in the widespread depletion of aquifers. The conversion of agricultural lands to high-rise commercial buildings also affects proper recharging.

Ineffective water management practices contribute to water scarcity by exacerbating water loss, inefficient allocation, and degradation of water resources. Over-extraction of groundwater, inefficient irrigation techniques, leaky distribution systems, and inadequate conservation measures all contribute to the mismanagement of water resources.

Urban planners should leave a "water buffer space" within every 1 km radius for proper recharging of the groundwater. For this, they should construct beautiful artificial lakes that harvest rainwater and recycled water. Similarly, in every household or high-rise building, the Government should see that they have proper working rainwater harvesting facilities.

Access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation is a basic human right and is essential for preventing waterborne diseases and maintaining health and hygiene. Without sufficient water, people cannot meet their basic drinking, cooking, and sanitation needs, jeopardising their health and well-being. Water is a key driver of socio-economic development, supporting various sectors such as agriculture, industry, and tourism. Water infrastructure investments, water-based industries, and water-related services contribute to economic growth and job creation. In regions where water is already scarce or shared by multiple parties, disputes over water allocation, usage rights, and infrastructure development can arise, leading to tensions and conflicts. In India, we have seen severe conflicts over water sharing in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. More such tensions will erupt in future when water scarcity increases.

The developments in science and technology can artificially produce anything related to human life, including food products or even human babies; however, research to date has not made it possible to produce water artificially. Hence, we need to maintain the natural water balance on this planet without disturbing it. In the current pace of urbanisation and environmental degradation being carried out by humans, it would be very difficult to regenerate water if it gets depleted.

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

KEJRIWAL CANNOT BE CM

Madam — Apropos news article "After Kejriwal, AAP Sealed," published on March 24, this is my response. As far as Arvind Kejriwal is concerned, he will have to stay out of politics for a long time. Aam Aadmi Party leaders may claim that Kejriwal will remain the Chief Minister. Still, now it will be almost impossible for Arvind Kejriwal to remain in the post of Chief Minister. Delhi state holds a special position. Here the Lieutenant Governor has unlimited powers. The Lieutenant Governor comes under the Central Home Department. In such a situation, if Arvind Kejriwal does not resign, he will certainly be dismissed in the future. The arrest of Kejriwal will have an impact on the election campaign of Delhi and Punjab. AAP is playing the victim card but the public must repeatedly criticise it.

That means the entire opposition is currently on the defensive on the issue of corruption. Kejriwal has committed a huge strategic and legal mistake by not responding to ED's nine summonses. He has to bear the brunt of this at the time of the Lok Sabha elections. If he had gone to the ED office for questioning in November itself, he would have been arrested today. One does not have to see this day. Even if ED had arrested him in November, he could have got bail after four to five months as it happened in the case of Sanjay Raut. The leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party made serious mistakes in the case of Arvind Kejriwal.

Govind Rao Rotti | *Vijayapura*

REGULATE REUSED COOKING OILS

Madam — In commercial settings like restaurants, it's common practice not to discard oil after a single use. Unfortunately, with deep frying, failure to regularly change the oil can lead to the generation of trans fats through repeated reheating, potentially causing inflammation in the body as per health experts. Unhealthy oils can adversely affect mainly heightening the risk of cardiovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes.

Repeated heating of oil also leads to the accumulation of visible and invisible granules, altering the oil's composition and introducing neo-formed compounds (NFCs) over time. This process diminishes the oil's nutritional quality. FSSAI lacks regulations or definitions for reused cooking oils, often leading food safety officials to rely on visual cues such as colour or appearance. Therefore, FSSAI must frame regulations for reused cooking oils.

Vijaykumar H K | *Raichur*

MONEY MANAGEMENT IS AN SKILL

Madam — Everyone continually works hard to accumulate wealth and lead a luxurious lifestyle, and money is the source of all these pleasures. Although making money is not a particularly tough chore for everyone, how one manages their finances is what counts. In numerous instances, individuals who were fortunate enough to inherit wealth but lacked financial management skills have become mired in debt; conversely, those who began from nothing and were fortunate enough to possess sound money management skills have seen their wealth increase threefold.

A quotation reads, "Money moves from those who do not manage it to those who do." Money management is very underrated but still, a very crucial skill to be learned although these skills are already built in the people of our country giving the right direction to these skills can add fuel to the fire. People should be taught money management skills like saving, investing and maintaining personal finances. This will help them to enjoy life to the fullest and have emergency funds on hand. It will also help them to become financially independent and lead balanced lives when they move abroad for college or a job.

Lisha Gera | *Ujjain*

The parched IT hub



Apropos news article "Zero Water Day Night in Bengaluru," published on March 25, this is my response. Bengaluru is known as the garden city of India. It had more green patches earlier. It had more lakes. Nearly 80 per cent were greenery patches. Now things have changed. Water scarcity was quite unknown to the people of this city since the perennial Cauvery River flows here. Now due to the advent of IT corridor, the city has become a concrete jungle. People have migrated in large numbers to Bengaluru. Also, the change in the climatic conditions and failure of monsoon rains have resulted in acute water scarcity. Water is more misused here than purposefully used. Even tanker supply by the Corporation is seen as inadequate. Private suppliers fleece the people taking advantage of the situation. The storage in the reservoirs is far below the demand.

Not only in Bengaluru but in other places of the state the situation is grim. Places like Raichur, Bellary and Mysore are reeling under water scarcity. Hyderabad, Chennai, Coumaote, Ooty, Delhi and Gurgaon are no exceptions. The Government should identify water storage lakes and desilt them periodically. Rainwater harvesting should be done on a war footing. Our forefathers saw potable water in rivers and lakes. The next generation saw it in the wells. We now see water in bottles. Our future generation will see it in capsules may ring true if we don't act now. We must sustain judicious water management else the situation will become disastrous.

Sravana Ramachandran | *Bengaluru*

Send your feedback to: **letterstopioneer@gmail.com**

NEW DELHI | WEDNESDAY | MARCH 27, 2024

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analysis 07

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FIRST COLUMN

LIFE SHOULD BE A PRECIOUS JOURNEY

In the rush to meet obligations, do we overlook beauty around us?



RAVI **VALLURI**

Life is something very precious, a divine gift given to us by God or nature. Do humans realise how high-priced is it? When we wake up in the morning, aren't we in a tearing hurry to accomplish all the unfulfilled tasks of yesterday?

Do we spend some quality time embracing nature, take a few deep breaths, spend moments in solitude and feel the silence encompassing us? Are we grateful for our existence or do we mechanically hit the gym and head for the kitchen to have the mandatory morning cup of coffee?

Yes, for sure morning exercise like a walk, a jog, or executing the chores are essential, but it is equally important to slow down the pace of life and become grateful to the Universe for its vastness and its exquisite grandiose geometry.

Pierce Brosnan, who wielded guns and gals with remarkable felicity once remarked, 'I realise how precious life is, probably because I've seen how it can be taken away.' As the cloud moves across the sky, so do moments in our lives. We need to be in harmony with our thoughts and actions and also realise the ephemeral nature of events.

Once, a student approached his Master and complained that he could not meditate as his body ached, he felt distracted or asleep and was extremely disconcerted. The wise man smiled and merely said that this would pass. After some days, the tutee was in an ecstatic mood and apprised his teacher that the meditation was wonderful and he had had an experiential feeling. He could observe stillness in the mind; see a shimmering light and experience levitation. The Master merely smiled and added that even this would pass.

Life should be treated as a celebration and as a precious gift since it is fleeting and transitory.



The sacrosanct premise of life therefore should be to focus on its truly celebratory nature and savour its prepossessing moments.

For all this to happen, we need to increase our prana/energy levels manifold. We derive energy from food, breath and rest provided to the body and by maintaining a calm and meditative mind. These sutras or tenets are imparted during the Happiness Programme of the Art of Living.

However, the prana/energy level needs to be sustained to nurture the precious moments of life. Humans have to treat their minds and bodies as sacred.

Early morning blues can be combatted with warm lime water laced with honey. It is efficacious for the human body to have a few glasses of this elixir of life. A sattvic diet helps in increasing prana levels and also in meditation. The purpose of yoga is not just performing physical exercises but to ultimately do pranayama and meditation. This helps assuage the mind so that we are in a position to recognise and appreciate life's precious journey.

Physical sciences, till recently, were all about matter and particles. However, newer studies reveal the mysteries of science have transcended the boundaries of matter and dwelled on waves and their patterns. Waves connect us to science and also to people.

While acknowledging the precious nature of life, we need to harness the potential further by choosing a passion. This is an outlet from the dreary ho-hum of life and we can appreciate the droplets on the petals, a nest built on our roof or a koel bird singing mellifluously.

In this age of a wired world, humans need to break the chains of tech bondage and develop a harmonious dwelling place where people care and share making life a truly momentous journey.

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Conspiracy theories abound for terror attack



NILANTHA **LANGAMUWA**

A cloud of speculation surrounds the Moscow terror attack; allegations range from claims of internal collusion to Ukrainian complicity, supported by the West



In the end, neither these corrupt politicians nor the manifestos of these inhuman actions, but unarmed civilians will have to pay the price. Over a hundred unarmed civilians were mercilessly killed by those brutal assailants, while hundreds more were wounded in Saturday's terrorist attacks on the outskirts of Moscow. Conspiracy theories, as in many other cases, are deepening. Some say it was an inside job orchestrated by certain parties to gain sympathy. Second, Ukrainians planned it with the help of Western intelligence agencies. Third, this was perpetrated by extremists. Consequently, conflicting yet interesting reports are emerging from all sides.

Though these warning messages sound fishy, the amount of intelligence activities in the region certainly emphasises recent detailed reports on CIA activities in Ukraine published by The New York Times, stating that the US and UK were in Ukraine long before the war. "At the end of 2021, Putin was considering whether to launch a full-scale invasion. He met with the head of one of Russia's main spy services, who told him that the CIA, together with British intelligence MI6, controlled Ukraine and turned it into a staging ground for operations against Moscow."

However, it is interesting to note that in this brutal attack, terrorists who targeted concertgoers at Moscow's Crocus City Hall not only successfully executed the operation, but also managed to evade capture and attempted to cross the border located over three hundred kilometres away. Later, according to Russian media, all four attackers were apprehended by Russian security forces. A man detained on suspicion of involvement in the Crocus City Hall attack has reportedly confessed to being promised a reward of 500,000 rubles, according to Russian journalist Margarita Simonyan. The alleged killer stated in a video posted by her, 'I shot down people at the Crocus for money; [I was promised] about 500,000.'

Strangely, Russia was attacked by the Islamic State, or more accurately, according to Western media outlets, by ISKP. The Islamic State—Khorasan Province is a regional branch of the Islamic State terrorist group active in South-Central Asia. At the beginning of this month, on March 7, the FSB stated that it had stopped an ISKP cell from carrying out a terrorist attack targeting a synagogue. "On the territory of the Kaluga Region, a stop was put to the activity of Wilayat Khorasan, a cell of the Afghan branch of the international terrorist organisation Islamic State, which is banned in Russia, whose members were planning to commit a terrorist act against one of the Jewish religious institutions in Moscow," the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said in a statement to the state-run TASS news agency.

What is fascinating is that almost all Western countries currently supplying arms, personnel, and other vital support, including precious intelligence, to Ukraine for its fight against Russia, were issuing early warnings about such brutal terrorist attacks. On March 7 and 8, several foreign embassies in Russia warned their citizens about the threat of terrorist attacks in Moscow. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow posted a security alert late on March 7, stating, "The embassy is monitoring reports that extremists have imminent plans to target large gatherings in Moscow, including concerts, and U.S. citizens should be advised to avoid large gatherings over the next 48 hours." The Finnish Foreign Ministry urged its citizens on Saturday to avoid public gatherings in Moscow over the weekend, following the US warning about possible terrorist attacks in Russia. The US Embassy further stated that it is actively monitoring reports indicating that "extremists have immediate intentions to target large gatherings in Moscow."

> WHATEVER THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES OR ANY OTHER GROUND REPORTS THAT CAME TO THE PUBLIC DOMAIN AFTER THIS HORRIFIC TERRORIST ATTACK, ONE THING IS CERTAIN: RUSSIA INDEED HAS INTERNAL SECURITY LOOPHOLES AND ENEMIES ARE CAPABLE OF SNEAKING THROUGH ITS SYSTEM

After the US warning, the UK issued a similar advisory advising UK citizens to avoid travelling to Russia due to the risks and terrorist threats. The British Foreign Office recommended against all travel to Russia. Germany, Latvia, and Estonia also urged their citizens and those with dual citizenship not to travel to Russia shortly. These advisories essentially highlight the reliability, effectiveness, and capability of Western intelligence agencies in the region.

However, it is important to pay attention to the argument made by the Ukrainian Defence Authority on the attack: "The behaviour of the criminals is also an important factor. They fled, although such attacks are characterised by suicides with the victims and the voicing of demands, or at least reasons. Accordingly, the criminals wanted to survive. But how did they cover a distance of more than 300 kilometres without being noticed? Why, having prepared so thoroughly, did they not do the simplest thing—buy a few spare cars to change on the way? Was it because they were guaranteed security by the Russian special services?"

These questions are undoubtedly crucial not only for unravelling the mysteries behind the attack but also for preventing its recurrence. This distinctive IS attack contradicts its previous behaviours; typically, IS members launch attacks to become martyrs. However, in this instance, they attacked to obtain "money" from unknown sources, a practice strictly prohibited, Haram, according to Islam.

Meanwhile, in his address to the nation, President Putin asserted, "All perpetrators, organisers, and masterminds of this crime will face fair and inevitable punishment, whoever they may be and whoever directed them. I emphasise once more: we will identify and bring to justice every individual who stands behind these terrorists, those who orchestrated this atrocity, this assault against Russia and our people."

Whatever the conspiracy theories or any other ground reports that came to the public domain after this horrific terrorist attack, one thing is certain: Russia indeed has internal security loopholes, and enemies are capable of sneaking through their system. It is clear that, according to Western pre-warnings of the attacks leading us to presume that these brutal attacks were pre-planned to execute during the recently concluded election where Putin marked the highest percentage of any elections since 2000. This signalled which side the majority of Russians were standing on, while the West kept repeating the same mantra of authoritarianism. On the other hand, can the Ukrainian President go for an election and prove the same, despite remaining in power by manipulating the constitutional clauses? However, Ukrainians, alarmed by the election, launched a risky invasion to halt voting in Russian border areas, particularly in Belgorod city and its region. During the three-day operation, Ukraine killed 11 civilians with drones and rockets and injured 82, including nine critically. Among the casualties were an election official and a thirteen-year-old girl, whose father was seriously injured.

Ironically, most Western nations with imperfect democracies expect their enemy countries to be "perfect democracies". This paradox can only please a mind accustomed to duplicity but will never overcome common challenges such as normalising the global supply chain and achieving peace while mitigating the burning risk of a possible nuclear attack. The most powerful nations, despite engaging in dirty politics to reaffirm their supremacy, will never hesitate to engage in anything contradictory to their preaching.

Nevertheless, determining whether this attack was carried out by ISKP or another group influenced by various integrated parties is a matter that requires verification. However, this attack has the potential to inspire other terrorists in countries facing genuine threats from IS, ISKP, and other extremist factions. We cannot underestimate the importance of security in the forthcoming Indian elections and ISKP's direct threats against China and its investments in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other places. In early September 2022, the ISKP published its most comprehensive critique of China to date, belittling the Belt and Road Initiative and calling on Muslims to take up arms against "red atheists whose hands are soaked with the blood of innocent Uyghur Muslims." Ironically, the tone of these threats is very similar to how the United States evaluates its competitors. Should we take lightly what the Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump repeatedly referred to as the president as 'Obama and Hillary Clinton are as ISIS co-founders'? Sometimes, political jokes, rhetoric and blabbering play a very important role in understanding the context of our day-to-day life and its reality.

(The writer, a journalist, expresses personal views which are independent of any institutional affiliations)

Controversial issues reignite India-Lanka relations

The contentious issues of Katchatheevu and Sethusamudram resurface amid Tamil Nadu's election fervour



KUMAR **CHELLAPPAN**

The schedule for the General Election 2024 has been announced and the State of Tamil Nadu is full of rattle and brouhaha over non-issues. The ruling DMK which has been maintaining silence over issues like the provision of drinking and irrigation waters and the fate of the State's fishermen arrested by the Sri Lankan Navy have dusted and taken out age-old topics for use as campaign materials in the election. A cursory glance over the election manifesto of the DMK drafted under the chairmanship of M K Kanimozhi, the late Karunanidhi's daughter by his third wife Rajathi, makes the reader doubt whether Tamil Nadu is a part of India or not.

One of the salient points of the DMK's election manifesto is to make Tamil Nadu a NEET-free State. This means that admission to the undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the State's medical colleges would be free of the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test, the selection system ordered by the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court. It was the UPA Government (2004-2014) in which the DMK was the second largest constituent that brought the NEET into practice. Similarly, the DMK would revive and resume the works of laying a canal through the Palk Strait known as the Sethusamudram Channel. The project work has been put on hold following directives by the Supreme Court based on the fact that it is neither economically sustainable nor commercially viable. The only motivating factor behind the revival of Sethusamudram Channel is that the DMK Government would be able to demolish the Ram Sethu, a stone structure believed to have been built by the army of Lords Ram to cross the sea in their mission to same Maa Sita from the custody of the Ravana. This is being seen as the Dravidian's reply to the Pranaprathista of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya held in January. The DMK has declared its mission to destroy Sanatana Dharma once and forever. Udhayanidhi Stalin, heir apparent to the DMK throne and the chief ministership in the eventuality of Stalin leaving Tamil Nadu for an early rendezvous with his father M Karunanidhi and ideological father Ramasamy Naicker, have declared time and again that Sanatana Dharma is more dangerous than Covid and Cancer and should be banished from the face of the earth.

Yet another promise made by the DMK is the retrieval of Katchateevu, a small islet handed over to Sri Lanka by the Government of India in 1975. The decision to secede this 285-acre uninhabited islet to Sri Lanka in 1975 was taken after a series of discussions involving top-level diplomats of Sri Lanka and India including G Parthasarathi, a close aide of Indira Gandhi.

Katchatheevu is an uninhabited islet in the Palk Strait. The islet once used for pearl farming was strategically important for fishing activities and was owned by the Raja of Ramnad and later became part of the Madras Presidency after the delimitation of Gulf of Mannar and Palk Strait during British rule between the then Governments of Madras and Ceylon. In 1921, both Sri Lanka and India claimed this piece of land and the dispute remained unsettled.

The agreement signed by Indira Gandhi and her Sri Lanka counterpart Sirimao Bhandarenaike in 1975 and 1976 says that with the establishment of the Exclusive Economic Zones by the two countries, India and Sri Lanka will exercise sovereign rights over the living and non-living resources of their respective zones. The fishing vessels and fishermen of India shall not engage in fishing in the historic waters, the territorial sea and the Exclusive Economic Zone of Sri Lanka, nor shall the fishing vessels and fishermen of Sri Lanka engage in fishing in the historic waters, the territorial sea and the Exclusive Economic Zone of India, without the express permission of Sri Lanka or India, as the case may be, according to the agreement. The agreement made it clear that Katchateev belongs to the territory of Sri Lanka.

From 1976 to 2008, the DMK and its leader Karunanidhi were silent over Katchateevu. It was a case filed by AIADMK general secretary J Jayalalithaa in 2008 that made Karunanidhi take up the issue as part of his political one-upmanship. When the case came up for hearing, the then chief justice R M Lodha asked Mukul Rohatgi, the then attorney general, what were the possibilities of retrieval of Katchatheev. "If you want Katchatheevu back, you will have to go to war to get it back," Rohatgi told the Court. In another development, the Coast Guard in an affidavit filed by it in Madras High Court said that it was the Tamil Nadu fishermen who violated the International Maritime Boundary Line and fished in Sri Lankan territorial waters. Sinha Ratnatunga, a respected editor of a popular newspaper in Sri Lanka said that more than 600 fishing boats from India cross over the IMBL and carry out bottom trawling in the island's territorial waters violating all norms. The bottom trawling using purine nets destroys the entire marine wealth in the Sri Lankan waters. The demand for the retrieval of Katchatheev is with an ulterior motive. The Dravidians do not want a cordial relationship between India and Sri Lanka. Should Lanka too end up as the Maldives? asks R R Wijayabalan, who is one of the best friends of India in the island nation.

(The writer is special correspondent with the pioneer; views are personal)