

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Rail infra push

There should be no compromise on safety

IN a major initiative aimed at improving as well as augmenting railway infrastructure across the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday inaugurated and laid the foundation stone of more than 2,000 projects worth about Rs 41,000 crore. As many as 553 railway stations will be redeveloped under the Amrit Bharat Station Scheme at a cost of over Rs 19,000 crore. The government's 'Viksit Bharat Viksit Railway' programme is aimed at upgrading the rail network and railway stations for the comfort and convenience of passengers.

In his speech, the PM said: 'Whatever India does today, it does it at an unprecedented speed and scale.' No less important than speed and scale is safety, especially since several train mishaps took place last year. More than 290 passengers were killed when the Comandrel Express and two other trains collided in Odisha's Balasore district in June. A collision between two passenger trains on the Howrah-Chennai line in Vizianagaram district of Andhra Pradesh had claimed 14 lives in October. Earlier this week, a freight train ran driverless for about 70 km from Kathua (Jammu) to Dasuya (Punjab) on the Jammu Tawi-Pathankot section before it was finally stopped by placing sandbags and wood blocks on the track. A preliminary probe has indicated lapses on the part of the driver and the station master.

Passengers undoubtedly want faster trains with better amenities, besides spick-and-span railway stations, but there should be no compromise on safety. The Railways must learn lessons from various mishaps and do course correction. The much-touted Kavach, an indigenously developed automatic train protection system, must be deployed in a time-bound manner on all routes across the country. The government had claimed in December last year that various measures undertaken over the years had led to a significant improvement in the safety performance of the Railways. However, a lot needs to be done to make train journeys safer.

Rathi's murder

Probe must be free from political influence

THE chilling murder of Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) state chief Nafe Singh Rathi in Haryana's Jhajjar district recently brings to light the sinister underbelly of political violence, which is a blot on our democratic polity. With the finger of suspicion pointing at local suspects with political affiliations as well as a UK-based gangster, who was also behind the killing of a BJP leader in Delhi a few months ago, it is becoming evident that this heinous act was plotted by elements deeply entrenched in the political underworld. It lays bare the international network of organised crime and the challenges it poses to law enforcement agencies.

Rathi's murder underscores the urgent need to reassess the criminal background of public figures facing a threat to their lives. The failure to provide him adequate protection despite repeated pleas raises serious questions about the government's commitment to impartially ensuring the safety of rival politicians. This is underpinned by the accusations levelled by Rathi's family against certain relatives of a BJP leader, implicating them in the murder plot. This adds a troubling dimension to the case, suggesting lax policing and political interference.

The decision to hand over the probe to the CBI reflects the importance of carrying out an unbiased and thorough investigation. The cooperation of all stakeholders — the government, law enforcement agencies and civil society — is vital to unravelling the intricate web of deceit. The perpetrators, regardless of their political affiliations, must be brought to book. Sure and swift delivery of justice can serve as a powerful deterrent to crime.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1924

JAITO IN THE ASSEMBLY

WE have no hesitation in saying that public opinion all over the country will strongly deprecate the action of the President of the Legislative Assembly in disallowing Pandit Malaviya's motion for adjournment of the House to discuss the occurrence of February 21 at Jaito. The decision would have been regrettable from every point of view, even if the authority of the rules quoted by the President in support of it had been clear, though, of course, in that case he would have had no choice in the matter. But as Pandit Malaviya pointed out with convincing force, the present case was easily distinguishable from those contemplated in the rules. The territory in which the incident occurred was undoubtedly Indian state territory, but the administration was wholly British and was carried in the name and on behalf of the Government of India. When such an administration makes itself responsible for an incident which deeply stirs the heart of the whole country, every consideration of logic, expediency and fairness, of common sense itself demands that it should come under the purview of the Legislature. But the case is even stronger than that. As Pandit Malaviya pointed out, it was not merely that the Government of India was wholly responsible for the administration of the state, but the persons who in this case had been either killed or wounded as a result of the firing resorted to under the orders of the administration were all His Majesty's subjects. Suppose for an instant that such an incident had taken place not within the territory of an Indian state but in an absolutely foreign and independent country. Does anyone really believe that the Indian Legislature could have remained unconcerned in regard to it?

The heft of China's multilateral diplomacy

Beijing has interlinked its Global Development Initiative with the UN's Agenda 2030

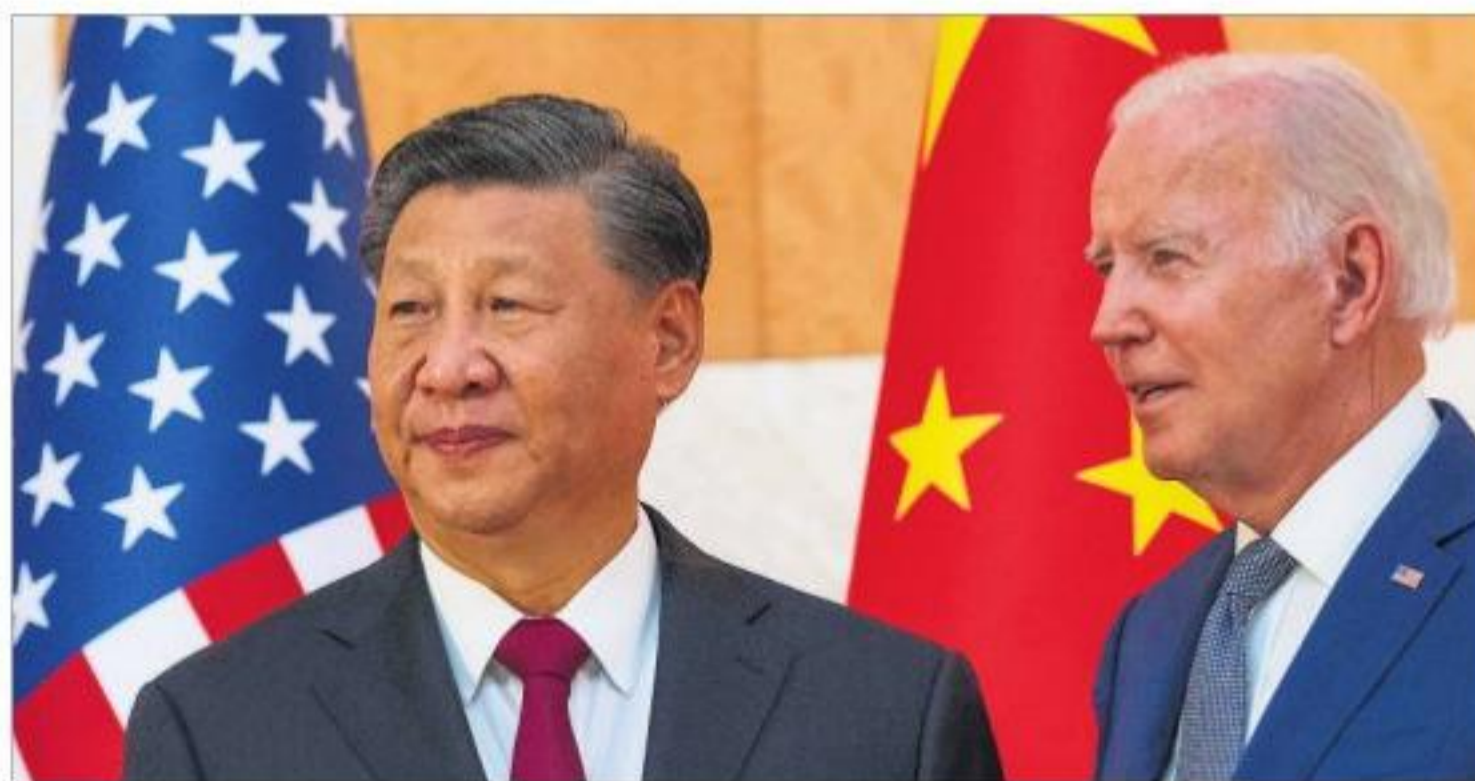


ASOKE MUKERJI
FORMER PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE
OF INDIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS

CHINA's multilateral diplomacy leverages its membership of international organisations to meet its declared objective of a "modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by 2049. At a time of increasing uncertainty in international relations, China sees the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as supportive institutions to achieve its national objective.

China supports the UN as the main platform for global security governance. It is the second largest contributor (after the US) to the UN budget (\$367 million/13 per cent). It is the only one of the permanent five (P5) members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) to contribute significant troops (2,500 out of 95,000) for UN peacekeeping operations, paying 15 per cent or \$900 million of the UN peacekeeping budget. China's position as a veto-wielding P5 country representing Asia, acquired as a precondition for creating the UN in 1945, gives it untrammelled power on legally binding UNSC decisions on threats to international peace and security, including terrorism. China's P5 status allows it to interlink its bilateral and regional relations with major and emerging powers.

Since August 1972, China has cast 20 vetoes in the UNSC, including 10 on the Syria issue. On the broader Asian canvas, however, apart from dominating UNSC positions on the situation in North Korea, Taiwan and Myanmar, China has been gen-



PLAYOY: China's participation in an interim appeal arbitration arrangement counters the US policy to atrophy the WTO's dispute settlement system by blocking fresh appointments to the appellate body. AP/PTI

erally circumspect. This has allowed the NATO members (France, the UK and the US) among the P5 to dominate the UNSC's decisions on Asian issues such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan.

China's profile in the UNSC could change following the launch of its Global Security Initiative (GSI) by President Xi Jinping in April 2022, and its call for 'indivisible security'. In 2017, the UN opened a liaison office in the Beijing-headquartered Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The GSI's six priorities draw on the principles and objectives of the UN Charter, but-tressing China's posture as an upholder of 'UN values' through 'dialogue and consultation'.

The most significant outcome of the GSI so far has been China's facilitation of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement in March 2023. In UNSC meetings, China has called for regional security frameworks for the Gulf and Afghanistan. It hosted the first China-Pakistan-Iran trilateral security meeting in Beijing in June 2023. Since October 2023, China has acquired the sole Deputy Secretary-General's position in the Kazakhstan-based CICA (Conference on

Using the IMF as its partner in 'rules-based' international cooperation, China has acknowledged mutually beneficial outcomes.

Interaction & Confidence-Building Measures in Asia).

A potential impact of the GSI would be the emergence of an overland Asian strategic energy/trade corridor with pipeline, railroad and digital connectivity between the Gulf and China. This would enable Beijing to bypass the existing maritime transportation hotspots of the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, and the South China Sea.

China has consciously interlinked its Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched by President Xi at the UNGA in September 2021, with the UN's Agenda 2030 and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The GDI has eight priority areas,

incorporating the SDGs on poverty eradication, food security (included in China's Global Food Security Initiative tabled at the G20 in Bali in 2022), industrialisation and innovation, and climate finance. To these, the GDI has added the emerging digital economy and connectivity, integrating China's infrastructure-driven Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Digital Silk Road and Global Data Security Initiative.

China has leveraged its financial and human resources in the UN to benefit from the implementation of Agenda 2030's goals. China's \$4-billion Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund announced in 2023, and its \$200-million UN Peace and Development Trust Fund set up in 2016, are both steered by the UN Secretary-General's Office, supported by a 70-country 'Group of Friends of GDI', most of them partners of the BRI. The UN's Department for Economic and Social Affairs, headed by a Chinese Under Secretary-General since 2007, is responsible for regular monitoring of Agenda 2030 implementation, getting data directly from UN offices on the ground.

Since April 1980, when it joined the IMF, China's transformation from a centrally planned to a 'socialist market-oriented econo-

my' has been a priority. Using the IMF as its partner in 'rules-based' international cooperation, China has acknowledged 'mutually beneficial' outcomes, including 'trust', from this relationship. In November 2015, China's Renminbi currency was included in the IMF's basket of currencies making up the IMF's Special Drawing Rights, allowing its international use for finance and trade. China is the third largest shareholder in the IMF after the US and Japan, giving it a decision-making role. This enables China to integrate its BRI and debt relief initiatives into IMF support measures for crisis-hit countries.

Beijing has three priorities in the WTO, which it joined in December 2001. It uses WTO agreements as the applicable 'rules-based order' to ensure MFN (most-favoured nation) treatment for its market access as well as to offset criticism of its dominant state-owned enterprises. It participates in ongoing WTO negotiations to formulate 'new rules', particularly in the digital economy. It upholds "the rule of law" based on the WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding as the key to countering the 'extra-territorial' application of laws by its trading partners (notably the US). Significantly, China's participation in a Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement set up in 2020 (which includes the EU, Japan, Australia and Singapore) counters the current US policy to atrophy the WTO's dispute settlement system by blocking fresh appointments to the WTO appellate body.

China's multilateral diplomacy is cognisant of the challenges to multilateralism. Following the China-US summit in November 2023, China declared that its preferred option was to "join hands to meet global challenges and promote global security and prosperity". The alternative was a "zero-sum mentality" that would "drive the world toward turmoil and division", to the detriment of China's core interests.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Passivity is fatal to us. Our goal is to make the enemy passive. — Mao Zedong

Tales of male chauvinism

CV SUKUMARAN

ARTHUR KOESTLER'S *The Act of Creation* mentions the story of a prince. While travelling through his territory, he spotted a man in the cheering crowd who bore a striking resemblance to himself. He beckoned him and asked: 'Was your mother ever employed in my palace?' 'No, sire,' the man replied, 'but my father was.' The prince was seemingly untroubled by a promiscuous father but could not approve of an unchaste mother — a perfect example of male chauvinism.

A late uncle of mine, my mother's cousin, had such a mindset. My mother's much younger sisters and I went to school together, carrying our afternoon lunch in a tiffin. Since we were brought up by my grandparents, my aunts and I grew up under one roof. This naturally made me think that they were my siblings!

The tiffin box, with six or seven tiers, was heavy. It was tiring to carry it alone. So, we shared the burden. However, this arrangement came to a halt — to my advantage, so to speak — when my uncle happened to cross our path as we were once heading for school. It was I who was holding the tiffin at that moment. He raised his eyebrows and right hand simultaneously — the former in surprise and the latter to stop us. What was it that I was carrying, he enquired. 'Lunch,' I responded. 'Only for yourself?' was his next question. 'No, for all of us,' we said in unison. 'Oh, is that so?' he asked incredulously. 'But why do you carry it alone?' he wondered. 'We take turns,' I said. 'From tomorrow, they will carry it, not you,' he said, pointing at my 'siblings'.

He promptly told my granny that henceforth the lunch tiffin would be carried by the girls as it was not a boy's job. And she, without an iota of hesitation, agreed. I naively and selfishly thought that he had liberated me from a weighty task, and it was only later that I realised the import of his patriarchal interference.

I remember another male chauvinist in my village. Even his mother was scared of him. Whenever she wanted to go out of the house to meet friends or relatives, she had to take his permission. Since talking to him directly was beyond her, she took outside help to that end.

His behaviour was like that of Napoleon — the tyrannical pig in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. He basked in the feeling of superiority over the female members of the house. It was always his way or the highway. No wonder he was persona non grata with many a woman in his village.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crop diversification is the key

Refer to the editorial 'Beyond cereals'; looking beyond traditional cereals is crucial for the growth of India's agriculture. To address the rising demand for milk, fruits and vegetables, diversification is imperative. Be it floriculture, pisciculture, pearl farming or milk production, embracing various agricultural practices is essential. Tackling the staggering 40 per cent food wastage, which is equivalent to 1 per cent of the GDP, requires concerted efforts. Efficient storage facilities play a pivotal role in reducing waste and propelling the sector forward. Transitioning from conventional farming methods is not just a choice but a necessity for sustainability, economic growth and ensuring food security in India.

VUJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKULA

Bring erring officials to book

Apropos of the editorial 'Custodial rape'; the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, which states that 275 cases of custodial rape were reported between 2017 and 2022, is a wake-up call. It is a reflection on poor governance and the indifferent attitude of society. It is a pity that in our country, women are not even safe in institutions like jails, remand homes and hospitals. And what is more disgraceful is that the officials entrusted with the duty of looking after the female undertrials are the ones committing such heinous crimes. These perpetrators must face stringent punishment. The editorial rightly highlights the need for an awareness campaign and the use of strong legal mechanisms to hold the bad elements accountable.

SUDESH KUMAR SHARMA, KAPURTHALA

Decentralise Railways

Refer to 'Scare as driverless freight train travels 70 km from Kathua to Dasuya, probe on'; that a driverless freight train with 53 wagons travelled nearly 70 km from Kathua in Jammu and Kashmir before coming to a halt at Unchi Bassi, near Dasuya, is concerning. Train fires and rail accidents occur because of the absence of men on duty. Mismanagement and uneconomical operations have become very common under the Railways. Since Independence, the train has remained a neglected mode of transport, thanks to the vested interests of those in power. Rail is a cheap mode of

transport. To exponentially increase rail transportation, dividing the Railways into independent corporations is a must.

ASHOK KUMAR GOEL, PANCHKULA

Mamata's shame

The horrifying events that recently unfolded in Sandeshkhali belie the Trinamool Congress' slogan of 'Maa, Mati, Manush'. The political slogan coined by none other than West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee has turned out to be a cruel joke on the people of the state. The obviously deliberate misreading of the Calcutta HC stay order on the formation of an SIT and Mamata's response to the uproar raises questions about the main accused in sexual assault and land grab allegations, Trinamool leader Shahjahan Sheikh, enjoying the protection and patronage of the party supremo.

AVINASH GODBOLEY, DEWAS (MP)

Release undertrials

With reference to the middle 'No human is a lost cause'; there is an urgent need to segregate and release the undertrials who pose no threat to society. Prolonged and never-ending trials can have a long-lasting impact on the mental and physical health of the inmates who are languishing in jails. Community policing, in consultation with the local police, can help curb the crime rate and bring down the number of criminals. However, it is also imperative that convicted murderers and rapists are not released on parole on flimsy grounds.

LT COL JS DULLAT (RETD), PATIALA

A loss for world of music

Apropos of the obituary 'Sonorous voice, gentle persona that made ghazal accessible to all'; with the death of renowned ghazal singer Pankaj Uddhas, the world of music has lost an iconic artiste par excellence, who will be remembered for his melodious voice and nuanced understanding of ghazal poetry, which resonated deeply with millions of music lovers in India and abroad. Today, the maestro is no more. But his evergreen hits, like 'Chitthi aayee hai' and 'Na kajre ki dhaar', that made him a household name, will stay with his fans forever.

RAMESH G JETHWANI, BENGALURU

Tap Into Hospitality's New Avatars

Top consuming class is fastest-growing segment

Hotel chains offering branded residences reinforces the concentration of India's hospitality industry, which is limited by its geographical footprint, and by the share of branded hotel rooms. The tendency to seek out new revenue streams in established locations such as metros to cater to lifestyle demands of the uber rich is a sign some pockets of the country are maturing as hospitality markets. Range of innovations can extend further in high-end retail and gatherings. Yet, these remain niche offerings, while the big push in hospitality should ideally emerge from the need for quality hotel rooms in new destinations. Improvements in connectivity are opening up new areas—and new forms—for hospitality. While the market's top end is increasing the sophistication of hospitality offerings, the mass market is going to be a sustained growth driver for the industry.

Broad industry categories such as convention tourism remain relatively untapped, although India offers an enormous diversity of options among its Asian neighbours. Local infrastructure development is bringing a new crop of locations into play that can expand the market for branded hospitality. Localised skill development is converting the employment opportunity thrown up by a wider tourism footprint. Most tellingly, though, living standards of a large section of the population are reaching levels at which demand for tourism explodes.

The industry is focusing on its fastest-growing segment, which happens to be the top consuming class with exposure to international hospitality standards. These are being extended to cover more of lifestyle, be it housing, retail or entertainment. This helps deepen the industry and establish benchmarks for further innovation. The Indian hospitality market is expected to retain its strong socio-cultural underpinnings based on religious and ceremonial tourism. These segments would benefit from the innovations the industry is borrowing from international markets. The demonstration effect is powerful in this service industry.

A Thicker Skin Suits A Growing Power

Power, of the hard as well as soft variety, is about knowing when to use a fly swatter and when to use a sledgehammer. Reacting to every critique, difference of opinion, point of opposition and irritant voice with a 'silencer' does not behove a robust democracy, let alone a democracy globally on the rise. As countries like the US, Britain and Israel have figured out over the decades, making a show of not allowing critical voices against government policy, especially from the academic and intellectual domain, makes for worse advertisement than if these voices are allowed to say their two-paise bit in a two-day conference. No administration has wobbled, no democracy has been shaken to its roots when in any institutional gathering, critical views against that administration or country have been aired. India should develop a thicker skin for its own self-imagining as a 'tough guy' rather than come across as a 'snowflake'.

British academic Nitasha Kaul is no terrorist. She holds a view antithetical to GoI policy and view held by (most) Indians. Her view, in our view, is biased, one-sided, wrong. And, yet, to deny the professor entry to participate in a convention on the invitation of the Karnataka government smacks of feeding the very criticism that India rightfully denies.

No one outside the convention hall in Bengaluru would have heard of Kaul were it not for the hyperbolic action taken against her. A few protesters would have done the needful to critique the critic. But by deporting her, despite her papers being in order, a rising power—which will face far more serious pushbacks over time as it becomes a bigger player on the world stage—has unnecessarily shown exaggerated concern, when all it had to show was displeasure.



JUST IN JEST

Backhanded compliments' counter is plaudits camouflaged as putdowns

RaGa, the Master of Backhanded Insults?

We're all familiar with backhanded compliments. 'You look great for your age' is probably on top of the 'backcom' pile of insults in compliments' clothing. Then there's the classic, 'He's much smarter than he looks,' which for the less smart can sound like a bona fide encomium. 'Your English is so good,' is special in that it covers both bases of class and nationality while being patronising. A person being 'surprising good' at something is unsurprisingly liable to raise brows—and rightfully so. Complimenting someone for being 'mature for his or her age' is another knobturner, especially in societies where college-goers are still referred to as 'children'.

But along with backcoms, could there be a phenom by the name of 'backhanded insults'? Essentially when someone insults a person, but actually ends up complimenting her or him? In this department, Rahul Gandhi could be a trendsetter. Recently, the man who seems much more capable than he seems to be (see what we did here?), trying to raise the issue of unemployment, described how he saw young men in Varanasi lying on the road drunk. 'This is UP's future—drinking and dancing on the road at night.' Funny thing is, Gandhi, in the process of castigating Varanasi's youth like Sanskari Uncle, may have ended up telling the country how youngsters in UP know how to have fun.

SWAMISPEAK Increased female participation in workforce implies prosperity, not distress

Working Better Than Ever



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

Female workforce participation has risen sharply since FY17, after declining for three decades earlier. This should mean higher incomes, even if real rural wages have stagnated. Free foodgrains would have further improved real income.

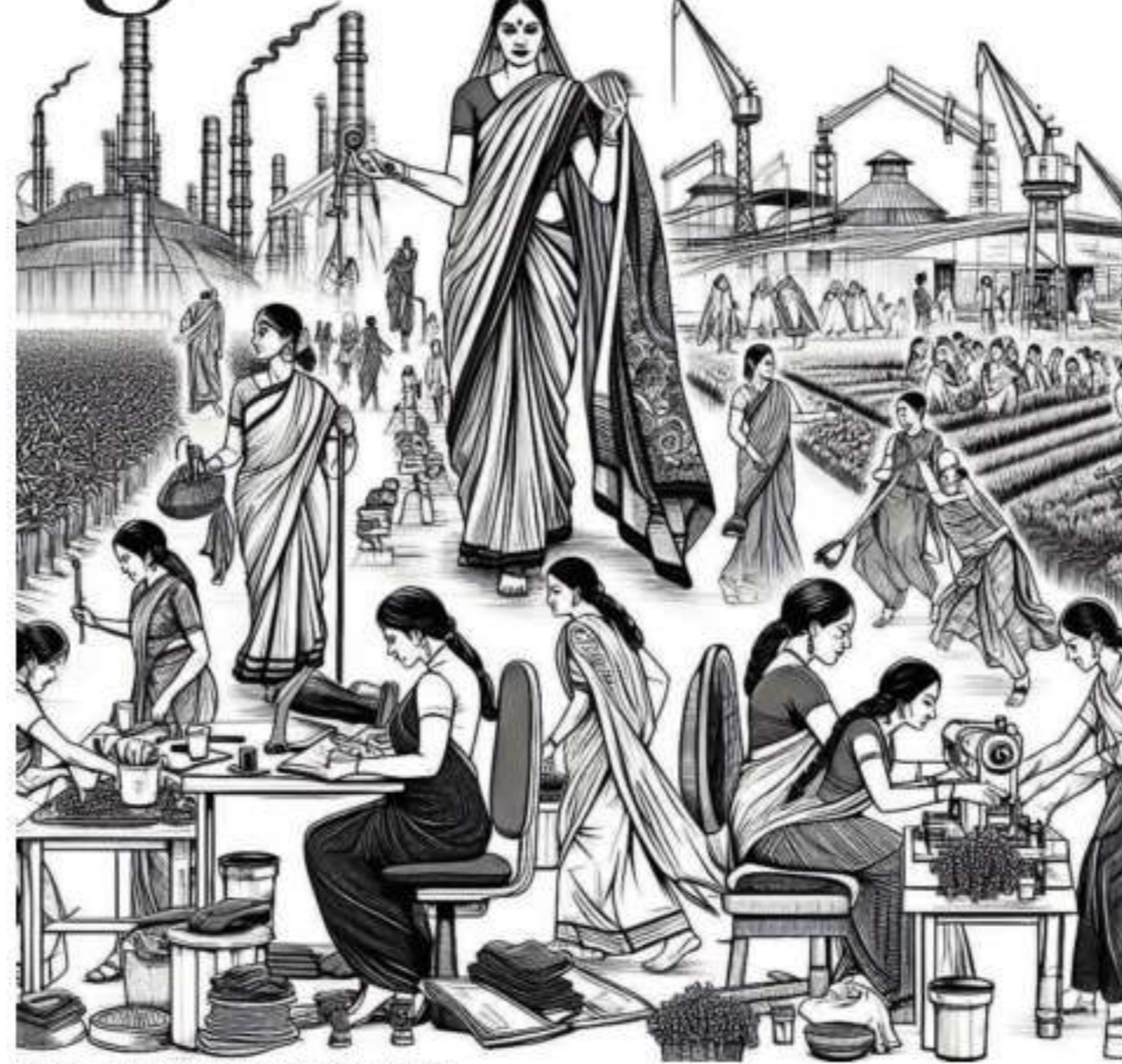
But critics, including Radhicka Kapoor, Ashwini Deshpande and authors of Azim Premji University's 'State of Working India Report 2023', interpret rising female work participation rate (FWPR) as distress, not prosperity. They point out that rising FWPR has been mainly in agriculture, a low-productivity occupation. Higher rural employment (including MGNREGA) could represent distress as people who had earlier withdrawn from the workforce were obliged to return.

The bulk of higher FWPR came from a sharp increase in unpaid self-employed women. Critics say this could imply lack of jobs and disguised unemployment.

Others, such as chief economic adviser Anantha Nageswaran, have more optimistic explanations. They point to rising multidimensional indicators for women, which is not consistent with distress. For women, the proportion in agricultural work entailing heavy manual labour is down from 23.4% to 16.6%, while the proportion in skilled agricultural work rose from 48% to 59.5% between FY19 and FY23.

Underlying trends are difficult to establish in an economy repeatedly hit by external shocks. India was hit by Covid in 2020, the Ukraine war in 2022, and El Niño in 2023. These shocks have certainly caused distress. But that should be temporary. We need several more years of data to conclusively untangle the impact of shocks from deeper underlying trends.

However, a recent paper by Bishwanath Goldar and Suresh C Aggarwal of the Institute of Economic Growth presents a



You've come a long way, devis

strong case for optimism. FWPR declined from 32% in FY94 to 20% in FY18, but then rose sharply to 28% in FY23.

The earlier decline was widely mourned as wasting India's demographic dividend. By the same token, the recent sharp rise should be called a welcome revival of the dividend. Instead, critics find distress in both the earlier decline and recent upsurge, with no sense of irony.

Between FY20 and FY22, rural men in agriculture declined by 13.3 million, and increased by 18 million in non-agricultural activities. Meanwhile women in agriculture increased by 22 million. So, the vast majority of higher female

employment appears to be replacement for men who are going into higher-productivity industry and services. Chandra Bhan Prasad says that in some villages, every single household has at least one male member who has migrated to a town and is sending home remittances. This is very positive. Goldar and Aggarwal say economic reforms have accelerated manufacturing employment, which grew by 4.7% in FY21 and 8.2% in FY22. This is unprecedented, they say. Employment rose a whopping 25% a year for enterprises with 10-19 workers, reflecting robust formalisation.

Had distress been driving poor people to work, FWPR would have risen fastest for the poorest deciles of the rural population. In fact, rise has been slowest for the poorest decile, from 16.5% to just 19%. It has risen fastest for the top two deciles, from 19.4% and 19.9% to 32.6% and 33.5%, respectively. This is encouraging.

Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) accounts for a significant proportion of unorganised manufacturing and jobs. Employment in this sector rose 28% between 2015 and 2022. This would account for an increase in the proportion of women in manufacturing and services rising from 9.5% to 13% between FY18 and FY22.

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Source: ADB, Reuters, ANI

*Emissions Trading System

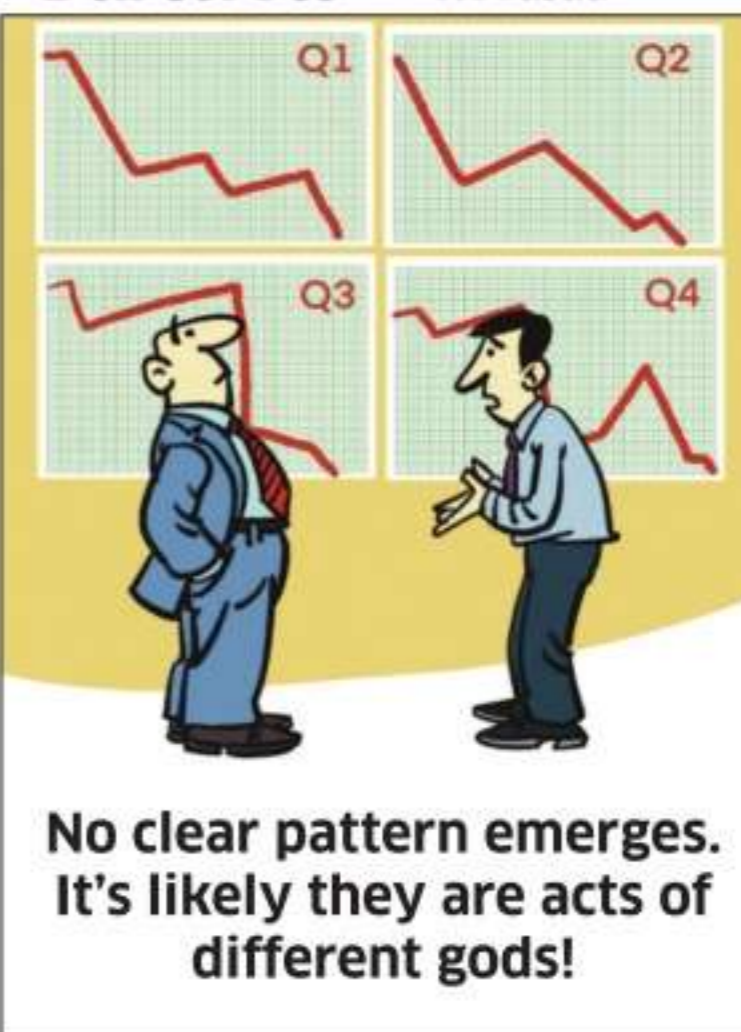
Carbon Border Tax

The EU's forthcoming CBAM is anticipated to yield only marginal reductions in global carbon emissions while modestly affecting trade flows, particularly in Asia and the Pacific, according to an ADB study. The report suggests that CBAM's impact on curbing global carbon emissions is estimated to be marginal, reducing emissions by less than 0.2% compared to an emissions trading scheme with a carbon price of €100 (\$108) per metric tonne without any carbon tariffs. Simultaneously, these charges may lead to a decrease of about 0.4% in global exports to the EU and a 1.1% fall in Asia's exports to the EU, while also adversely affecting certain manufacturers within the EU...

Impact of EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) Exports to the EU (% change)

	ETS* only	ETS & CBAM
Developed Asia	-1.7	-2.6
Central & W Asia	-7.7	-7.5
East Asia	-0.6	-2.4
South Asia	-1.2	-1.2
SE Asia	-1	-2
Pacific	-0.4	-2.3
China	-1	-2.1
India	-0.6	-2.6
S Korea	-0.3	-1.9
OECD Europe	-1.65	-1.51
North America	-1.72	-3.03
Sub-Saharan Africa	-4.74	-6.24

Bell Curves



India, What's Cooking?



Seema Sirahi

It seemed like the whole world (minus one) went to India last week to figure out the design of the new order, the content of the discontent and the nature of fixes. The battlefield of ideas was littered with remnants of the old and saplings of the new. Remains of a British lord's lecture on imperialism created a special stink.

It's not an exaggeration to say that 'Raisina Dialogue' brings together more disparate voices than other such conclaves, especially those in the West, and attempts a vastly better geographical distribution of those voices. This year was exceptional, with more than 2,500 participants from 115 countries—the Nordics, Baltics, islanders, old powers, new players and lone rangers were all there with their smart takes.

The debates: multipolar vs bipolar, Global South vs Global North, autonomy vs alignment, challenges vs capacities, and systemic reforms vs status quo. Architects of the old order are in search mode for new partners given these disruptive times. They don't want to discuss 'how' we got here, only how to navigate the present and the future. A recitation of failures, as recently as during the pandemic, brings back memories when the rich hoarded vaccines and stole medical supplies from the weak. The debris of a once successful order was in plain sight.

New actors also want partners, but there are caveats—existing rules must change, the table reset, with more chairs and the menu expanded. The push is palpable, and the diplomacy by 'middle

powers' like India is blunt and forceful. The fear of reprisals is minimal—the Global South is already suffering the ravages of one pandemic and two wars, to say nothing of the rules made by a few for the few, back when the liberal order was created. When they speak, the wise listen, the foolish lecture, and the rest remain 'surprised' that countries like India are determined to pursue their own national interests.

Exhibit A was, of course, Russia. S Jaishankar argued that the world should give Russia 'multiple options' instead of pushing it closer to China. The advice alarmed many Westerners, even if deep down they know their commitment and budgets for Ukraine are running low. But differences on Russia are real and will continue to pose challenges for Indian diplomacy in intangible ways. Pursuit of self-interest will be seen as a sign of untrustworthiness. As Brookings scholar Tanvi Madan noted on X, the 'prisms and priorities' regarding Russia remain very different for Europe and India.

The gap on Russia has widened also by one-sided or partial narratives. Shaping different narratives, especially for telling the India story, is important for what Jaishankar calls 'cultural rebalancing'. The foreign minister called it 'a big debate of our times', a debate he clearly wants to win. His arrows were sharp: one side doesn't get to define who is politically correct, who's not and who rates higher, who doesn't. The naming and shaming is nothing but 'an extrapolation of the competition' because the 'smartest way to play the game is to

become the judge'. Accusing India of 'hedging' and 'balancing' in a multipolar world misses the point that India will soon be a pole and 'own' a side. It won't be 'gamed' by others.

If the pandemic, captured supply chains, unhealthy concentration of manufacturing in a certain country and military aggression from the same country opened Western eyes to the political and economic imbalances of globalisation, it's time their third eye opened to cultural imbalances.

Questioning skewed narratives is an old Indian diplomatic preoccupation. While it drew yawns and eye-rolls in the past, today people are listening. For one,

India's economic and political weight on the global stage is greater. It's more active than before with 600 projects underway in 78 countries, some in partnership with others. Leaders see that India can deliver (vaccines) and deploy its navy as a security provider. Fact-based analysis regarding Russia provides even as they try to grapple with domestic policy changes.

What's undisputed is that India was the world's fastest-growing major economy for the last two years and is set to do it again in 2024. MNCs are rushing to set up global capability centres (off-shore, in-house units) to tap into local talent. At least 20% of Forbes Global 2000 companies have such centres in domains stretching from tech, automobiles, pharma to biotech and banking. Companies and countries want to do business with India. That's the story, even if not as widely told.

Goldar and Aggarwal believe conditions for women to work have improved because of better infrastructure and reduction of crime in states like Uttar Pradesh. The programme for piped water to all rural households has released women from fetching water from distant sources. One study suggests that a reduction of 100 minutes in household chores raises FWPR by a whopping 10%.

In UP, FWPR is 38% in places where over 90% of households have running water, but drops to just 15% where less than half the households have piped water. So, piped water, along with cooking gas and electric appliances, is helping raise FWPR.

Cellphones have improved information and raised employment by better matching seekers of work and hirers. Financial inclusion has improved financial security. Fintech companies, microfinance companies, self-help groups and MUDRA loans have provided more finance than ever before for rural

employment appears to be replacement for men who are going into higher-productivity industry and services. Chandra Bhan Prasad says that in some villages, every single household has at least one male member who has migrated to a town and is sending home remittances. This is very positive. Goldar and Aggarwal say economic reforms have accelerated manufacturing employment, which grew by 4.7% in FY21 and 8.2% in FY22. This is unprecedented, they say. Employment rose a whopping 25% a year for enterprises with 10-19 workers, reflecting robust formalisation.

Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) accounts for a significant proportion of unorganised manufacturing and jobs. Employment in this sector rose 28% between 2015 and 2022. This would account for an increase in the proportion of women in manufacturing and services rising from 9.5% to 13% between FY18 and FY22.

Had distress been driving poor people to work, FWPR would have risen fastest for the poorest deciles of the rural population. In fact, rise has been slowest for the poorest decile, from 16.5% to just 19%. It has risen fastest for the top two deciles, from 19.4% and 19.9% to 32.6% and 33.5%, respectively. This is encouraging.

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Source: ADB, Reuters, ANI

*Emissions Trading System



THE SPEAKING TREE

Is Honesty Best Policy?

OSHO

The man who first made up the maxim, 'Honesty is the best policy,' must have been a very cunning man. Honesty is not a policy, and if it is a policy, then it is not honesty; you are honest because it pays, you will be dishonest if that pays. Honesty is the best policy if it is paying, but if sometimes it is not paying, then dishonesty, of course, is the best policy.

What is politeness? It is a kind of politics. The three words, policy, politeness and politics, have the same root, they all mean the same thing. But you think politeness is a nice quality. You would not think of it as politics, but it is. To be polite is a defence measure. In Europe you shake hands. Why do you shake the right hand and not the left? It is really politics. To shake hands is nothing friendly. It is just a gesture: 'My right hand is empty, so don't be worried. And let me see that your right hand is empty too; it doesn't have a knife.' It is a way of giving certainty to each other that you are not going to harm him.

In India, you greet with both hands, but that too is just showing that both hands are empty. It is far better than shaking hands, because who knows about the left hand? Our culture and religions teach us to be hypocrites in such subtle ways that unless you go deep in search, you will never find out what you have been doing.

Abridged from 'From Personality to Individuality', courtesy OSHO Times International, www.osho.com

Chat Room

Flunked Byju's Flung Textbook

Apropos 'What Byju's Teaches Us' by Kiran Somvanshi (Feb 27), once heralded as the torchbearer of innovation, Byju's today finds itself in a debacle because of multiple causes, including sponsoring irrelevant events and choosing brand ambassadors with less educational connections. Students are likely to get misled about Byju's panoramic views, and its credibility could be jeopardised by these mismatches. Byju's aggressive sales tactics, too, are criticised for prioritising revenue over educational progress of students. Its journey teaches us that edtech business must remain centred on education.

SAMBHAV JAIN
Ujjain

Get a Stronger Whip, RBI

This refers to the news report, 'Vijay Shekhar Sharma Steps Down from Paytm Payments Bank Board' (Feb 27). Vijay Shekhar Sharma has stepped down as chairman of Paytm Payments Bank that had linked one PAN with 10,000 accounts. An ICICI Bank branch manager recently embezzled ₹16 crore from a customer's account after tampering with her KYC details. A manager of a different branch was withdrawing money from customers' accounts and opening new accounts to meet targets. While banks perpetrate fraud so easily, they make their customers go through hoops to rectify errors in KYC, aptly kill your customer. All of these are being carried out right under the hawk-eyed watch of the venerable RBI.

MBHOWMIK
New Delhi

Watan Se Chitthi Aai Hai

Apropos the news report, 'Renowned Ghazal Singer Pankaj Udhas Passes Away' (Feb 27), the sonorous voice of the renowned ghazal singer Pankaj Udhas has fallen silent. In the corridors of Indian music, the indelible impression of his soul-stirring ghazals has transcended generations. His 'sharabi' songs not only refer to liquor's literal intoxication but also as a metaphor for life itself. Udhas' dedication to music was recognised with the Padma Shri in 2006. His loss to the music world is unbearable. The silver in his mellifluous voice will forever shine like his unforgettable song, 'Chandi jaisa rang hai tera'.

GURPREET SINGH
Mohali

Letters to the editor may be addressed to editet@timesgroup.com



OPINION

The
Hindustan Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Reinventing the United Nations

Ukraine and Gaza wars point to marginalisation of the UN: It needs radical reforms to reflect the new global reality and intervene effectively in crises

The near-total failure of the United Nations (UN) to cope with most crises in recent years is perhaps the reason why the Ukraine conflict has been taken up at the G20 for the past two years. Though most of the players at the G20 knew it was hardly the forum to address such a geopolitical matter, they persisted with it, reflecting the growing frustration with the UN's ability to respond speedily to a global crisis. Against this backdrop, it is understandable that the Indian side, especially external affairs minister S Jaishankar, has often called for speeding up the efforts to reform the UN and the Security Council, both to reflect the realities of the contemporary global order and to give more countries a seat at the main decision-making table. Jaishankar reiterated this position at the recent Raisina Dialogue, emphasising the need to reform global forums amid the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza.

Two years after Russia invaded Ukraine, there is no sign of any closure. Ukraine has not quite rolled over but Russia has survived crippling Western sanctions and managed to avoid global isolation. The Global South is willing to do business with Russia because these countries believe, as Jaishankar put it, the Ukraine war is Europe's war. In Gaza, Israel is being shielded by the US veto at the UN despite the rest of the world seeking a ceasefire.

The UN is being ignored since most of the world has no interest in the body, perceiving it as a playground of the big five powers. This has to change, simply because the world has become multipolar, and important power centres such as India and Saudi Arabia are clear about strategic autonomy and their zones of influence. Former US president Donald Trump's persisting attacks on NATO have triggered new thinking in Europe about looking beyond the US security umbrella and creating their own military preparedness.

All of this churn will have consequences, and in the absence of strong and representative global bodies, especially a reformed UN, one may have to contend with a multipolar world without an arbitrating centre, heightening the prospects of more bullying, conflicts and a fresh arms race. It is thus imperative that there is a breakthrough in the negotiations for UN reforms, trapped in a long cycle of repetitions for 15 years, so that the body is finally representative of a truly changed world.

Team India's GenNext calms future fears

There is one Test still to go, but the series against England is won. Bazball has come up short in the toughest place to tour in world cricket. India have won 17 series on the trot at home, and that record is built not just on the opposition's weaknesses but also its mastery of the conditions. The win hasn't come easy, but with India sitting on the unassailable 3-1 lead, it can be easy to forget that the hosts lost the first Test.

The talk, then, was about how Bazball could bulldoze India, how the sweep and its variations could blunt Ashwin & Co, and how the inexperienced batting line-up may not be up to the task. India were missing seniors, among them Virat Kohli, KL Rahul, and Mohammed Shami. It was in this scenario that the youngsters put their hands up. Jaiswal, all of 22, came to the party with 655 runs at an average of 93.57. Shubham Gill scored 342 runs at 48.85. Dhruv Jurel showed he has nerves of ice on his way to making 175 runs at 87.50. Sarfaraz Khan's debut will be remembered for the two fifties he scored when the hosts were in trouble. And Akash Deep's spell was worth its weight in gold at Ranchi.

Granted, England's attack wasn't great for the conditions, but the determination shown by India's young bunch augurs well for the future. India's older pros are not in their prime anymore, and this is probably the right time to start preparing the Next Gen for the big show. It helps that this generation hasn't grown up trying to find its place in the world game. These players are sure of where they are, and where they want to be. India won't mind that at all.

How Indians dominate America's party system

Indian-American leaders are central players in the five political strands, from the far Right to the progressive left, that animate the US today

America has a two-party system in theory. But in practice, both the Republican and Democratic Party are coalitions in themselves. And it is perhaps more accurate to see the US as a polity with five distinct political strands that find representation within these two parties and compete to define its dominant ideology.

The Republican Party is witnessing a great civil war between its dominant far-Right wing and old-school conservatives struggling to retain a voice within the party. The Democratic tent is home to centrist democrats (with a small d), the centre-Left, and the progressives.

Strikingly, taking off from a recent cover piece in *The Nation* magazine on the desi influence in conservative politics as an inspiration, the story of these five strands can be told through Indian Americans.

Begin with the far-Right. This strand offers the following policy prescriptions. One, America needs to focus inward on building economic resilience through corporate tax cuts; relentless exploitation of energy; and sharp reversal of existing trading arrangements. Two, America needs to narrow down on its international commitments, draw back from

Europe, and focus largely on China. Three, America must strongly secure its borders and institute tougher immigration policies on the grounds that the economy can't sustain the new entrants and social demographic changes are inviting conflict, with the subtlety that migrants represent a threat to political dominance of White Christian population. Four, America must crack down on "woke" politics, be it sexuality or education on racism or affirmative action or anti-war movements. And five, the American federal government and investigative agencies are politically compromised and require a dramatic reboot including through downsizing.

While Donald Trump is the true pioneer and face of this strand, Vivek Ramaswamy is among the next-generation faces of this movement today. Indeed, at a conservative political action conference in Washington DC, Ramaswamy emerged as among the favourites to be Trump's vice presidential pick.

Move to the centre-Right conservative strain. This dying breed of moderate Republicans differs from the far-Right in three crucial respects. One, in terms of international commitments, this school believes that American strength rests on alliances, a commitment to NATO, and partnerships. And the US has to confront the Russian challenge in Europe, the China challenge in Indo-Pacific, and Iran in West Asia together. Two, in terms of culture wars, moderate Republicans align with the party's agenda on abortion, gun rights, and education, but

are less paranoid and somewhat more open to diverse viewpoints. And finally, moderate Republicans have faith in the American institutions and abide by democratic rules, marking a contrast from the defenders of the January 6 mob attack on the United States Capitol.

While Mitch McConnell leads this segment in the Senate, Nikki Haley is now the public face of the moderate Republican flank. The fact that she lost Iowa and New Hampshire primaries to Trump, got routed in her home state of South Carolina, and got less than the votes polled by 'none of these candidates' category in Nevada shows how politically weak this segment today is. But it does represent a substantial constituency, visible in the 43% vote polled by Haley in New Hampshire and 39% in South Carolina. It isn't enough to win, but if this segment stays home, Trump's prospects in the general elections suddenly become bleak.

Switch to the Democratic

Party tent. Joe Biden leads the Democratic centrists and centre-Left. This school shares the moderate Republican commitment to the traditional American security role in diverse global theatres. It has picked from both the far-Right and progressive quarters and steered a new industrial policy with an investment boom inside America. It shares the progressive view on abortion rights but frames it both as a public health issue and a women's rights issue. It recognises structural racial discrimination but also believes in incremental reform. It is commit-



Nikki Haley is now the public face of the moderate Republican flank REUTERS

ted to expanding the social safety net while keeping an eye on the high deficit. And, on immigration, it seeks to strike a balance between both more stringent law enforcement and a more humane policy.

Among Indian-Americans, Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi of Illinois is a centrist. But the most prominent claimant of the centre-Left mantle is Ro Khanna, the House Representative from Silicon Valley. He is seeking to occupy a space that is left of the centrists and right of progressives and is expected to throw in his hat for the presidential run in 2028. Khanna speaks the language of technology to the market, of economic patriotism to the working class in middle America, of pluralism and representation to the minorities, of hard national security measures on China and of ceasefire in Gaza, and the language of corporate exploitation and campaign reform to the progressives.

And finally, peek into the progressive strand. While they have their own internal contradictions, broadly speaking, progressives are sceptical of free trade; opposed to what they see as

the military-industrial complex driving American engagements globally; advocates of using structural racial and gender discrimination as fundamental prisms to view inequality and frame policy; champions of a wider social safety net; strong opponents of corporate power and proponents of higher taxes; fierce climate policy defenders; and lobbyists for more active American interventionism on issues such as human rights in the rest of the world.

The most prominent faces of this segment are House progressive caucus chair Pramila Jayapal, and Vice President Kamala Harris, who shares many of these progressive convictions though it does appear that the stint in executive leadership has shifted her politics to the centre, especially on foreign policy.

This five-party framework perhaps helps explain why American politics is today more noisy, divided and complicated than ever before. And Indian-Americans are up there, arguing democratically, often with each other, about the future of their new land.

The views expressed are personal

Kumar Shahani, a lingering luminosity

Early January this year, when I talked to Kumar Shahani, the auteur who passed away Saturday in Kolkata, he was his cheerful self. To my casual query on the phone, he said that he was reading *Sahaj Path*, a Bengali primer written by Rabindranath Tagore with Nandalal Bose's linocut illustrations. He said he was reading its "pratham bhāg" (first part), which contains Tagore's preliminary ideas of Bengali alphabet, its structure and pronunciation. While explaining to me, he spoke like a child and said he wanted to make a film out of the four-part *Sahaj Path*. What a beautiful gift it would have been had Shahani been able to turn *Sahaj Path* into a holistic film of his vision.

Shahani, then, recalled his childhood spent in Larkana in Sindh (now in Pakistan), where he was born on December 7, 1940. After graduating from Bombay's Elphinstone College, in 1966, he graduated from the Film Institute of India (later Film and Television Institute of

India) in Pune, where he stood first in diploma examinations in advanced direction and screenplay writing. His diploma film *The Glass Pane* was shown at International Students' Film Festivals in Prague and Amsterdam. In 1967, his post-diploma film *Mannad Passenger* was made at this film institute. During 1967-1969, Shahani underwent an intensive study of cinema in Paris. While in France, he worked with Robert Bresson on his first colour film, the 1969 *Une femme douce* (A Gentle Woman), adapting Fyodor Dostoevsky's Russian novella.

And precisely this brings me to talk about Shahani's debut feature film *Maya Darpan* (1972) adapting Nirmal Verma's Hindi short story of the same name. *Maya Darpan* is the only film in the entire history of Indian cinema that explores colours in a uniquely metrical manner, bestowing cinematography with a refreshing grace. In my interview with him, almost four decades ago, he explained to me the colour structure of *Maya Darpan* while also referring to his film *Tarang* (1984). "You know, *Maya Darpan* is like a lyric. It needs to counterpoint the flow of life by a rigid axis, a metre to which I remain close throughout the film. Red and green emerged from the story. They are, of course, closely related to fertility in almost a universal manner. Orange and blue represent fire and water. Like red and green, they are complementary." Shahani felt that the use of colour was more abstract in *Tarang*, especially since the range of tonalities opened up in it.

Another of Shahani's contribution to Indian cinema is his idea of the Epic Cinema. In fact, with *Tarang*, Shahani returned to his long theoretical and practical engagement with the epic tradition in Indian art. Between *Maya Darpan* and *Tarang*, there was a gap of 12 years. After the completion of *Maya Darpan*, Shahani intensified his study of the epic structure in cinema and the allied arts. It had been his concern ever since he met the great Indian polymath and teacher, DD Kosambi, while studying at the film institute in Pune, where Ritwik Ghatak was his teacher. During this period, Shahani also received the Homi Bhabha Fellowship for the study and practice of the epic form. "The other significant experience which shaped *Tarang* was my experience of the Maharashtra drought. It filled me with a great sense of pride, hope and belonging to a people who could overcome both social oppression and natural calamity with such grace." Shahani made a short film called *Fire in the Belly* (1973) on this drought, which the

Mumbai-based film society Screen Unit screened in his presence. Later, I had the privilege and the honour of heading Screen Unit. Shahani became my informal but integral mentor and teacher who shaped Screen Unit, which its many young members treated like a film school. Smita Patil, who essayed the role of Janaki in *Tarang*, passed away on December 13, 1986. In Screen Unit's programme note of December 26, 1986, I quoted Urvasi from *Rigveda*, "What shall I do with those discourses of yours? I have gone over like the first of the Usas. O Pururavas, go back to your destiny; I am as hard to get as the wind." In *Tarang*, Janaki (Smita Patil) tells this to Rahul (Amol Palekar) in the last scene which has a conjectural/mythical note. The myth is that of Urvasi and Pururavas. In his book *Myth and Reality*, Kosambi writes about this legend. Shahani's cinematographic oeuvre composes an extraordinary symphony of the cosmic and the concrete, of poetry and pondering (introspection). That evening, Shahani called to thank me for my profound homage to Janaki, Urvasi and Smita Patil. Those were the times of the big, black landline telephone that filtered human voices into their organic self. Shahani's sense of sound was extraordinary and he wrote extremely immersive essays on sound in cinema (e.g., *Notes for an Aesthetic of Cinema Sound*, 1978).

He would often come to Screen Unit's programmes and talk to us with deep passion and love. In 1990, I had organised a retrospective of Michelangelo Antonioni's films, covering nine of them (all on 35mm), which I called the Antonioni Navratris. I also edited and published an accompanying booklet titled "Antonioni Epistemology". While people played the Navratris garba and dandiya in the city, we celebrated the Antonioni Navratris at the erstwhile House of Soviet Culture (HSC) on Mumbai's Pedder Road. He delivered the inaugural lecture and on the last day of the Dussehra, conducted a master class on Antonioni on the terrace conference room of the HSC. The morning light on his lustrous skin and smile is still etched on my mind.

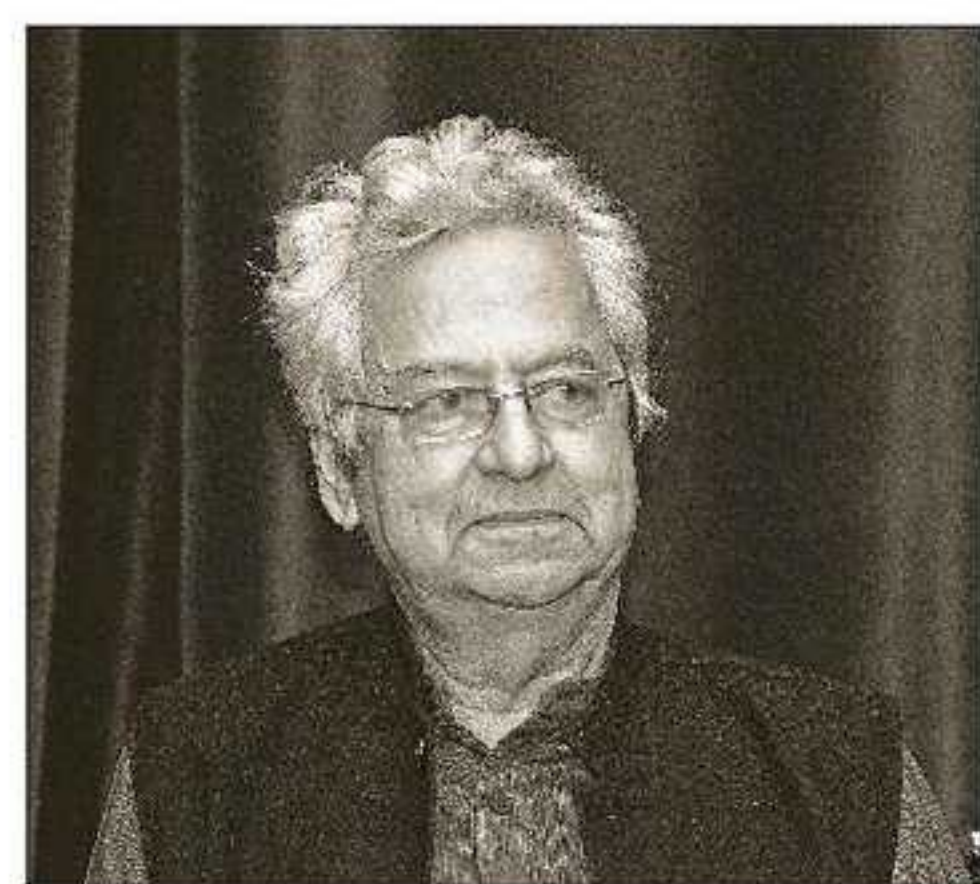
Kumar Shahani is a lingering luminosity. Amen.

Amrit Gangar is a Mumbai-based author, historian and curator.

The views expressed are personal



Amrit Gangar



Kumar Shahani, the auteur, passed away Saturday in Kolkata HT PHOTO

GENERAL MANOJ PANDE | CHIEF OF ARMY STAFF

Recent developments reinforce the fundamental fact that India's security cannot neither be outsourced nor be dependent on others

Leverage UPI's global leap for remittances

Efforts to internationalise the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) have gained momentum lately, with transactions now facilitated across seven countries (Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, the UAE, Singapore, and France). With ambitions to achieve two billion transactions per day by 2030, UPI is poised to imprint India's digital finance infrastructure on regions with which it has strong trade and diaspora ties. The recent authorisation for Indian tourists to use UPI for transactions at the iconic Eiffel Tower signals global recognition for what is arguably India's finest fintech innovation.

The internationalisation of UPI holds immense potential to strengthen remittance flows to India. Remittances continue to play a crucial role in India's economy, serving as a stable source of foreign exchange and contributing to incomes and savings. According to the World Bank's December 2023 Migration and Development Brief 39, India is projected to be the largest recipient of remittances, with inflows expected to increase by 12.4% to \$125 billion in 2023, equivalent to 3.4% of India's GDP. In 2024, inward remittances will likely reach \$135 billion.

Despite the high and consistent inflow of remittances over the years, the process of sending and receiving money through traditional channels has remained challenging for India's diaspora. By leveraging UPI's growing international reach, the government can significantly enhance the efficiency and convenience of remittance transfers. The real-time, seamless and cost-effective nature of UPI transactions makes it an attractive option for remitters, compared to traditional methods such as bank transfers or money transfer operators. Such channels have often involved high transaction costs, lengthy processing times, complex documentation requirements, and the risk of fraud. UPI's leaner model has the potential to significantly reduce remittance transaction costs, with estimates suggesting a 25% cut in transfer fees compared to traditional channels. This makes UPI an attractive option for both small-value and frequent remittances.

Moreover, UPI's accessibility through smartphones, even in remote areas with limited banking infrastructure, will likely democratise access to remittance services. The widespread adoption of UPI internationally can facilitate financial inclusion in two ways. First, by providing easier access to remittance services for unserved and underserved migrant workers and their families, UPI can empower more individuals to participate in the formal financial sys-

tem. Second, by lowering the barriers to entry for remittance service providers, UPI can significantly expand their market reach, improve operational efficiency, and enhance the overall remittance experience and utility for their customers. Specific policy measures are essential to seize the UPI opportunity for remittances. First, UPI's integration with other countries' payment systems can significantly boost remittance flows, as demonstrated by the collaborative efforts with Singapore's PayNow since February 2023. Using the routes of bilateral agreements, the government should more rapidly expand such partnerships with international stakeholders to establish interoperability and seamless integration of UPI with global payment systems.

Second, ensuring regulatory clarity and interoperability is crucial to instilling trust among migrant users and service providers. The RBI should bring out clear guidelines on cross-border UPI transactions, including regulatory requirements and dispute resolution. This will help streamline the remittance process and mitigate potential risks.

Third, UPI's international presence can catalyse innovation in financial products and services tailored to the needs of migrant communities. By integrating remittance services with UPI-enabled platforms, financial institutions can offer a diverse range of solutions, including savings accounts, insurance products, and investment opportunities, empowering migrants to build a secure financial future.

Fourth, investing in robust cybersecurity infrastructure and data protection measures is imperative to safeguard the integrity and security of UPI transactions, particularly in the context of cross-border remittances. Implementing stringent cybersecurity standards and regular audits will help mitigate the risk of fraud and unauthorised access. In this regard, RBI must expedite the process of regulatory harmonisation with its international counterparts while launching financial literacy and awareness campaigns to strengthen understanding and adoption of UPI for remittance purposes.

Policymakers, regulators, and stakeholders must join forces to craft a framework that not only guarantees the smooth integration of UPI with global payment systems but also fosters a secure and reliable environment for users. By doing so, India's fintech innovation can bring about positive changes in remittance processes.

Amarendu Nandy is assistant professor (economics area), Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Ranchi.

The views expressed are personal



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Religious internationalism

Christian nationalist promise to 'make America pray again' will ripple in global arenas



RAJA MANDALA
BY C RAJA MOHAN

COSTS OF A BARRIER

High tariff walls allow inefficient players to survive, hurt consumers. Government must review industrial, trade policy

SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, India had been steadily moving towards a low tariff structure. The average tariff declined from 125 per cent in 1990-91 to 13 per cent in 2014-15, according to a study. However, since 2014 there have been around 3,200 tariff increases, with the largest increases occurring in 2018, according to a paper by economist Shoumitro Chatterjee and the former chief economic adviser to the government of India, Arvind Subramanian. These large tariff increases, which can be traced to the government's call for *atmanirbharta* or self-reliance, have meant that the average tariff rate has risen to around 18 per cent, affecting a sizeable segment of the country's trade basket. India's tariffs are amongst the highest in the world. In fact, they are not only higher than those of China (7.5 per cent), but also countries like Vietnam (9.6 per cent) and Bangladesh (14.1 per cent) — India's competitors in the China plus one strategy. High tariffs place manufacturers at a disadvantage, affect export competitiveness and hurt consumers. Alongside this growing protectionism, the targeting of Chinese imports post the Galwan clash is also now being seen as impacting domestic output or loss of competitive advantage in sectors such as electronics and pharmaceuticals — China accounts for a sizeable share of India's imports, especially inputs in key sectors and capital goods. According to a report in this paper, sections within the government have begun raising these issues, favouring a more nuanced approach. This should spur conversations in the government on its approach towards promoting manufacturing and facilitating exports.

Reportedly, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology had also earlier this year pressed for reducing duties on parts including circuit boards, chargers and fully assembled phones. Groups representing cell phone manufacturers had said that the country's high tariff structure is a disincentive to de-risking supply chains beyond China. Seeking to be attractive alternatives for mobile manufacturers, countries like Vietnam, Thailand and Mexico are lowering tariffs on phone components. There are some indications of a rethink on the issue — a day before Union Budget 2024-25, the government announced a reduction in the import duty for components used in the manufacturing of mobile phones from 15 per cent to 10 per cent. This is the right approach. Erecting high tariff walls allows inefficient domestic players to survive, and hurts consumers.

Alongside, the government must press ahead with signing trade agreements. After initially showing some hesitation, it has signed a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with the UAE and an economic cooperation and trade agreement with Australia. It is currently negotiating agreements with other countries such as the UK. It must pursue similar pacts, including with the European Union.

THE YOUNG ONES

Newcomers combined with seniors to complete a memorable cricket series triumph against England

WHY DOES A home Test series win against England feel so special? For the first three days, in fact, England had collapsed, India had a runaway 190-run lead, and the five-match series felt a bit too long already. It was then that Bazball, England's attacking philosophy with which they beat Pakistan in Pakistan and pushed teams to introspect around the world, reared its head. Ollie Pope stunned India with a brilliant hundred, replete with innovative momentum-snatching sweeps, before their novice spinners rolled over India in the chase on a turner. For the first time in years, it felt that an overseas team had the ability, skill and mental strength to thwart India in their own game.

The anxiety in fans had increased once injuries ruled out KL Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja in addition to the news that Virat Kohli won't be available for the entire series. Indian batting looked brittle and even young guns like Shubman Gill and Shreyas Iyer were in a difficult situation. For the first time, R Ashwin, Jadeja, and Axar Patel looked a touch "rattled", in former England batsman Kevin Pietersen's words. And visuals of Rahul Dravid visiting the pitch and talking with curators became viral. The undercurrent was that India will need to change their pitches. They did, preparing more batting-friendly tracks to counter England's inexperienced spinners and their one speedster Mark Wood. India banked on pacer Jasprit Bumrah to sprinkle his magic but the batting was down to the youngsters.

One by one, they stood up. Yashasvi Jaiswal showed that his story isn't just a romantic tale of a boy who sold panipuris making it to the big league. Gill, who as this newspaper reported, was told by the team management to be ready to step down to domestic cricket if his form doesn't improve, responded with a hundred. Not everyone flourished: Shreyas Iyer fell, Axar Patel fell, KS Bharat fell. But India did enough to win. In the third Test at Rajkot, more young guns stared down the English snipers. Sarfaraz Khan impressed on debut, wicketkeeper Dhruv Jurel showed spark. In the next game at Ranchi, without Bumrah, Akash Deep laid the groundwork before Ashwin ensured all is well with his world and Kuldeep Yadav again showed why he should be considered ahead of Axar in future elevens. Jurel exploded with two game-turning knocks and Gill played his character-defining innings in the chase as the newcomers combined with the seniors to complete a memorable series triumph.

YESTERDAY ONCE MORE

Paul McCartney's admission of a filial connection to a Beatles classic affirms the curious afterlives of songs

IT BEGAN ITS life with the working title "Scrambled Eggs", a sort of joke between band members about a melody that Paul McCartney claimed to have arrived at in his dream while he was living with his then-girlfriend at her Wimpole Street apartment. The boys from Liverpool might have had a hard time writing words to it, but, as classics go, there is very little to fault in how 'Yesterday', the 1965 Beatles song, turned out. Now it appears that part of the anguish of the breakup anthem might just have been a Freudian slip. In his podcast, *A Life in Lyrics*, McCartney, 81, has revealed that the lyrics, "Why she had to go, I don't know, she wouldn't say, I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday", might have been a posthumous apology to his mother, Mary — who he lost to cancer when he was 14 — for a teenage episode of misdemeanour.

It is hard to not be touched by the admission, given the fact that McCartney has, on several occasions, spoken of how his mother's death had affected him. It lay at the core of his special bond with John Lennon, who, too, had lost his mother to an accident. The lyrics of 'Yesterday' are credited to them, even though in interviews the two spoke of how McCartney was the one responsible for finally whittling it down to its essence.

It might have taken McCartney years to unspool the tangled threads of unconscious inspiration, but, like all works of art, the afterlife of a song is a curious thing. It cares little for the original thought, building new associations. The Beatles were no stranger to it: When their psych-rock number 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' came out in 1967, based on a drawing by Lennon's nursery-going son, speculation was rife that it was a veiled endorsement of the hallucinogenic drug, LSD. The song survived. The legacy of 'Yesterday' is only likely to be enhanced by McCartney's admission.

AS HE RACES to clinch the Republican Party's presidential nomination, Donald Trump is intensifying the outreach to America's Christian nationalists. At a speech last week to the Christian Broadcasters Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, Trump promised to protect and defend Christian values against the onslaught of the liberal left that wants "to tear down crosses". Quoting repeatedly from the Bible and invoking God, Trump promised to use the full power of the White House to end the "persecution" of Christians and put Christian values at the centre of American political life. "With your help and God's grace, the great revival of America begins on November 5th," he said.

Christian conservatives and radicals of different kinds have long been part of US electoral politics. This election season, they are melding into a powerful political stream that seeks to make America a Christian nation. Although there is no single platform and agreed agenda, several demands stand out. Christian nationalists would like to end the separation of Church and state, push back against LGBTQ rights, abolish abortion rights, counter what they see as ultra-liberal hegemony over educational institutions, and reverse the rising tide of immigration into the US.

The rise of "Christian nationalism" in the US and its growing resonance across the Western world is likely to open some interesting intersections with the BJP and the Indian government in the widely expected third term of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Traditionally, India has had little engagement with the Christian political formations in the US and the West. That has begun to change in the last few years, as many of these conservative forces reach out to the BJP.

But first, to four paradoxes of Christian nationalism in the US.

One is the unlikely warmth between Trump and the Christian nationalists. Trump certainly does not come across as a "man of piety". In 2016, Trump was not the preferred candidate among Republicans. It is a relationship that has grown big since then. Trump has rightly claimed credit for his administration's record in appointing conservative judges to the US Supreme Court and challenging liberals on a range of issues. Today, many Christian

nationalists fervently believe that Trump is the "chosen one" on a "divine mission" to deliver America back to Christ. Christian nationalists hope to "make America pray again", which works well with Trump's promise to "make America great again".

Second is the tensions between the formal secularism of the US constitution and the traditional centrality of religion in the fabric of American polity. The US constitution does not establish a state religion but Christianity has remained an important factor throughout its history. Going back to the early 17th century, John Winthrop, the founder of the Massachusetts colony, invoked the Bible to describe it as a "city on a hill" in "covenant with God". The first settlers were eventually described as "pilgrim fathers". In the mid-1950s, the US added "under god" to the loyalty oath and made "In God, we trust" the country's official motto. In the 2000s, George W Bush promoted "faith-based initiatives" to complement social welfare programmes. The last few years have seen a steady spread of Christian nationalist ideology among the lower courts, state legislatures, and local governments.

America's Christian 'nationalism' is going 'international'. In Europe, variants of Christian nationalism are on the rise and are boosting far-right political parties. The European agenda is similar to the American one — opposition to immigration, especially Muslims, the protection of traditional European culture, rejection of gender rights, and promotion of family values under threat from the liberal hegemony over social life. Connections are being forged between the Christian nationalists across the Atlantic.

Third, liberal critics tend to dismiss Christian nationalism as part of the hopeless agenda to "make America white again". To be sure, the Caucasian fears of marginalisation lend an ethnic and exclusivist dimension to Christian nationalism. However, sections of Christian nationalists are inclusivist and reach out to African-American and Hispanic Christian communities that are socially conservative and reject the liberal secularising agenda.

Fourth, America's Christian "nationalism" is going "international". In Europe, variants of Christian nationalism are on the rise and are boosting far-right political parties. The European agenda is similar to the American one — opposition to immigration, especially Muslims, the protection of traditional European culture, rejection of gender rights, and promotion of family values under threat from the liberal hegemony over social life. Connections are being forged between the Christian nationalists across the Atlantic. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and other European leaders who support traditional values have been lionised by Christian

nationalists in the US. A surprising figure on that list is Russia's Vladimir Putin, who has put religion and ethno-nationalism at the top of his political agenda. The Christian nationalist enthusiasm for Putin is one factor behind the current deep American divisions on Ukraine.

The rise of religious nationalism in Christendom, in parallel with the consolidation of the BJP as the dominant force in the Indian polity, could mark a major break in the evolution of India's internationalism. Over the last century, India's global political connections were shaped by India's communist, socialist and Congress parties that built ties with the left and centre-left forces in Europe.

The decline of the communist parties in the West has been matched by the marginalisation of the Indian communists. Although the social democratic parties in Europe remain a force to be reckoned with, the Indian socialists have fragmented into family-dominated fiefdoms with little interest in global affairs and no capability to engage with their historical counterparts in the West. The Congress has long ceased engaging its centre-left counterparts in the West.

Unlike Congress and the Left, the RSS and the BJP have less of an internationalist history. This is unsurprising given their nativist roots. This could change as the nativists around the world go global. Over the last few decades, the BJP has begun to connect, if tentatively, with political parties in other countries.

As it expanded at home in the last decade, the BJP has enhanced its outreach to the diplomatic missions in Delhi as well as foreign political parties under the "Get to know the BJP" initiative. Christian Democrats and other conservative parties in Europe, too, have been knocking at the BJP's door.

It is not clear if Christian nationalists can overturn liberal hegemony in the US and Europe, but they are bound to make some difference to Western politics, domestically and internationally. This could open up new international possibilities for both the BJP and the Modi government, which have often locked horns with the Western liberal establishments in recent years.

The writer is a contributing editor on international affairs for The Indian Express



KESAVA MENON

WILL THE DASHAVATHARA now become the Sashatavathara? According to a litigant in the Calcutta High Court, the associating of Hindu gods with animals is blasphemy. If this argument is accepted, Matsya, Kurma, Varaha and Narasimha are illicit? From where does the concept of blasphemy come into Hinduism?

Those who petitioned the Court to direct the West Bengal government to change a captive lioness's name from Sita to something else might argue that their objection is to the appellation of Janaki's name to an animal. Don't they know that this very name — as also Lakshmi and Nandini — have been given to cows since time immemorial? These appellations were always bestowed with the utmost reverence on the creatures that were the most beloved in the farmsteads.

If the High Court upholds the petitioner's argument, the precedent will play havoc with ceremonial practices throughout India. In Kerala, for instance, most elephants that participate in festive processions bear the names of Hindu gods. A number of them have huge fan followings and some continue to be legends years after their demise. What are the two Padmanabhans and the Kesavan of the Guruvayur Devaswom to be known as from now on — Temple Tuskers P1, P2 and K1?

Or, is the objection to Sita's name being appended to a carnivore? For the moment, let us

AN ENCOMPASSING FAITH

Petition to change name of lioness shows lack of understanding of Hinduism

IN GOOD FAITH

When a basic tenet of Hinduism postulates the equality of all creation, how can anyone claim it sanctions the extension of the caste system to the natural world, that some names aren't for lesser beings? As the reverence for elephants, tigers, bulls, cobras, even Ganesha's rats indicates, the animal kingdom is for Hindus a reflection of the celestial realm. As are peepals, banyans, lotuses and tulasis.

leave aside the fact that she was a Kshatriya and hence no one commits any wrong in ascribing to her such culinary habits. Did the petitioners forget that they are living in Bengal where the lion/lioness is so integral a part of the Durga puja iconography? Most tableaux installed in the pandals depict Durga impaling Mahishasura while her lion/lioness mauls the buffalo part of the demon's torso. Lady and beast are one in the fight against evil. A mere glance at Nandi's idol in Mysuru's Chamundi Hill is enough to make anyone comprehend why Shiva chose this powerful animal as his comrade-in-arms.

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Our religion doesn't consist solely of Vedantic profundities, or high *yagnas* or *bali* or the bawdier phases of harvest festivals. It encompasses all these and more. For over five millennia, almost every shade of the human experience has been observed, analysed, weighed morally and woven into a bewilderingly rich symphony of aphorisms that offer

guidance but do not necessarily prescribe.

There are always shades and nuances. In our common understanding, Duryodhana is the villain of the Mahabharata. However, there are places where he is worshipped as Suyodhana. On first hearing, one wonders how that can be until one remembers his last speech delivered as he lay with a shattered groin. Then you cannot but admire his indomitable nature, his generosity towards friends and his refusal to let others judge him.

Or Jayadratha for that matter. In the popular imagination he sticks out for two actions, both reprehensible — the attempt to abduct Panchali and shutting down Abhimanyu's support lines. However, I have come across Sindhi nationalists in Karachi who honour him as an epitome of their race's virility.

Seldom do we come across one right or wrong. Our perspectives and judgements must be shaped by weighing multiple factors, just as life itself is. We can reverse Ganesha's *vahana* but we will still trap and kill any rat that enters our kitchens. In this moral/spiritual universe, we need to see reality as clearly as we can and use our capacity to discriminate constantly. For that we need open minds, not an uncontrolled instinct to shut down whatever we think we cannot bear to hear.

The writer is former editor of Mathrubhumi

FEBRUARY 28, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

AKALI LEADERS' ARREST

NINE AKALI DAL leaders were arrested on charges of insulting national honour. Parkash Singh Badal and four others were arrested in Delhi after they burnt copies of a section of Article 25 of the Constitution. In Chandigarh, SGPC president Gurcharan Singh Tohra and others were arrested after they tore copies of Article 25 and deleted the word "Sikh" from a clause clubbing Sikhs and Hindus.

ECONOMIC SURVEY

THE PRE-BUDGET ECONOMIC survey speaks of mixed trends in 1983-84 with a relatively

high overall rate of growth of six to seven per cent in the gross national product (GNP), improved balance of payments, continued inflationary pressure, particularly on consumer prices, showing an annual rate of inflation of 1.25 per cent sluggishness in government revenues due to lower than expected tax receipts.

BANDH SUCCESSFUL

THE GENERAL STRIKE in Delhi to protest against the killings in Punjab and Haryana and the inability of the government to deal with extremist violence was a success as most markets, business establishments and industrial units remained closed for the entire day.

Essential services, including transport, water and electricity, remained unaffected as they were exempt by the BJP's strike call.

ZIA'S SURPRISE MOVE

PAKISTAN'S MILITARY GOVERNMENT, in a surprise move, freed six opposition leaders from detention. One of those released was Sardar Sherbaz Khan Mazari, chief of the banned National Democratic Party and convener of the 10-party opposition coalition, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). Mazari said: "I don't know the cause of release. The authorities informed me about the withdrawal of the detention order today."



19 THE IDEAS PAGE

Our burdened children

The pressure that the Yash Pal committee had spoken of in the 1990s has been compounded by new factors and forces



KRISHNA KUMAR

SPORADIC EXPERIMENTATION IS familiar to students of the history of education in our country. The latest to be tried out is the open-book examination. This, too, is not new, but this time it is expected to reduce the pressure that children are under. The ingredients of this pressure were the object of an inquiry by a committee that gave its report some three decades ago.

Committees come and go, but the problem persists, and some problems acquire greater virulence. A small committee chaired by the late Professor Yash Pal studied the problem of stress on school children in the early 1990s. He was a space scientist who answered — on TV or in newspapers — hundreds of questions posed to him by children. His slim report 'Learning Without Burden' was the focus of a recent workshop held at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. The participants debated how the term "burden" should be defined in the present-day context. Has it diminished, increased, or has it mutated?

The Yash Pal committee was set up in response to a moving speech given by the novelist RK Narayan in the Rajya Sabha. He was a nominated member and this was his maiden speech. Its emotional appeal brought tears to the eyes of the then Deputy Speaker, Najma Heptulla. Other members were also moved by Narayan's description of children's daily ordeal.

Their heavy school bags and the long hours they spend doing homework and receiving extra tuition have ruined their childhood, Narayan said, labeling the problem as a national madness. The Yash Pal committee attributed this madness to a false conception of knowledge and poor curriculum design. It reflected a "catch up" syndrome based on the popular belief that an explosion of knowledge had occurred in the West, and India had to catch up. Poorly designed syllabus and textbooks, and unimaginative pedagogy exacerbate the "catch up" syndrome.

On top of these systemic factors, children face the stress of a competitive social ethos. Instead of mitigating it, schools contribute to it by promoting an all-round competitive mentality. Principals are under the pressure of management committees and bureaucrats to show better results. To survive in the system, teachers push children to aim at higher levels of performance. With weekly and monthly tests, a breathless routine destroys the child's search for meaning in what is taught. They take recourse to cramming — and the exam system also promotes it.

Speakers at the TISS workshop drew upon a recently published volume that examines the question: "Where are we a quarter century after the Yash Pal committee report?" It has been edited by Mythili Ramchand, Ritesh Khunyakari and Arindam Bose. The contributors have looked at the different domains of the school curriculum and the state of teacher education. A few gains made under the auspices of reforms initiated in the school curriculum and in teacher education are noted. However, the Covid years nullified some of these gains, and now the system is facing a whole new set of difficulties. Deletions from textbooks have made them shorter, but harder to comprehend. And the shortage of teachers



CR Sasikumar

has become chronic across the country as a recent report published by TISS ('The Right Teacher for Every Child') demonstrates on the basis of an extensive survey.

The workshop had a session on technology. Its impact on children and on teachers is largely uncharted territory. It has also witnessed a sharp polarisation among promoters and critics. Three teachers spoke at the workshop about their frustrating experience with the enforced use of technological resources. A counter view was also presented.

Undoubtedly, the burden that the Yash Pal report had discussed is now mutating into a broader subject — of pervasive anxiety among parents, teachers and children. It has to do with the new economic and work environment. With career opportunities dwindling, the pressure to compete for the two old, high-status professions — medicine and engineering — has greatly increased. Commercial coaching takes full advantage of this pressure, and it has raised it to levels hitherto unknown.

The popularity of technology and coaching has increased side by side, feeding the new testing style. It follows a "multiple choice" template. It presents roundabout ways of approaching the same topic, challenging the student, literally, to crack the code to give the right answer. Coaching institutes have cracked this system so satisfactorily that they now proudly invite students to suffer through the prolonged ordeal of dealing with MCQ-based tests shot off like a machine gun. What little

The burden that the Yash Pal report had discussed is now mutating into a broader subject — of pervasive anxiety among parents, teachers and children. It has to do with the new economic and work environment. With career opportunities dwindling, the pressure to compete for the two old, high-status professions — medicine and engineering — has greatly increased. Commercial coaching takes full advantage of this pressure, and it has raised it to levels hitherto unknown.

scope there was for school teachers to focus on understanding and the pleasure it brings has receded.

Though he died only seven years ago, Yash Pal could hardly have imagined the transformative changes that children's lives would go through in this period. It started as a strategy to deal with the Covid crisis. Those who thought of using the online alternative to real classrooms developed a sense of smug pride by the time the pandemic passed.

Teachers knew that the online plan had not worked, but they didn't have much say when it was pushed in the post-pandemic new normal. Indeed, one can't think of any period when teachers had a say in our system. When they are pushed, they push children, and parents join in. So, the burden that the Yash Pal committee had spoken of has been compounded — by new factors and forces that we don't recognise anymore. We need another RK Narayan to say that some strange madness has gripped us. We all want to give a purpose to our children. By the time they pass out, they forget what it means to be interested in something — anything.

It is anybody's guess whether an open book exam will resolve this deeper problem that the Yash Pal report had pointed out. For him, the goal of good teaching was to create intrinsic motivation. Our failure to create it needs a broader remedy.

The writer is former director, National Council of Educational Research and Training

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"What we really need right now are decisive actions, and the political will to take them. We hope that the new leadership in the environment ministry will treat air pollution with the urgency that it deserves, otherwise it risks repeating the history of failure." — THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

Culture as development

It is recognised as a standalone goal under India's G20 presidency. This will have important consequences



GOVIND MOHAN AND LILY PANDEYA

UNDER INDIA'S G20 presidency, members for the first time unanimously endorsed the advancement of culture as a standalone goal in the New Delhi Leaders' Declaration and the Outcome Document of the Culture Working Group, called the Kashi Culture Pathway. This milestone marks a paradigm shift in the global development strategy as it underscores culture as a fundamental pillar for inclusive and sustainable development and recognises its impact on social inclusion and economic growth.

Culture, despite its profound influence on society, is absent from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This stands in contrast to its widely acknowledged relevance in the 2030 Agenda. The United Nations General Assembly Declaration, which enshrines the 2030 Agenda, mentions the importance of culture in fostering understanding, tolerance, mutual respect, and an ethic of global citizenship and shared responsibility. However, the Declaration does not specify the role of culture, leaving its contribution vaguely defined. This gap overlooks the comprehensive role it plays in sustainable development.

In the contemporary context, culture has proven critical to ensuring rights-based and inclusive sustainable development models, encompassing the diversity of societies and supporting the localisation of the SDGs. It serves as a conduit for inter-generational communication and learning, reinforcing social norms and values.

Culture also permeates a wide array of public policies, serving both as a catalyst and a facilitator for multiple developmental objectives. Its cross-cutting nature resonates with the foundational principles of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda advocates for an integrated, networked approach to sustainable development, encompassing 17 SDGs and 169 targets. It conceptualises sustainable development as a complex interplay of interconnected factors, underscoring the intricate interdependencies and synergies among various public policy sectors.

Despite the absence of a specific SDG dedicated to culture, it plays a pivotal role in achieving all 17 SDGs. The influence of culture spans from poverty reduction (SDG 1) and quality education (SDG 4) to employment (SDG 8), social justice (SDG 10), and environmental preservation (SDG 13), with its significance explicitly recognised in numerous targets. The contribution of culture to sustainable development, therefore, extends beyond a mere sectoral role. It is integrative and transcends the social, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainable development.

Recognising culture as a standalone goal within the post-2030 development agenda is essential due to its transformative impact

on society. This standalone goal would galvanise global action, nurture creativity and intercultural dialogue, empower marginalised communities, and safeguard vulnerable heritage. By weaving cultural considerations into the core fabric of development, we unlock its transformative potential, ensuring a more equitable, just, and sustainable world for generations to come.

As the international community begins to reflect on the challenges and terms of reference for a post-2030 Agenda, it is timely to consider how culture could take its proper place in future commitments, goals, and targets. Establishing culture as a standalone goal in the post-2030 Agenda would address the current gap and ensure a holistic approach to sustainable development.

India's support for culture on the global stage is grounded in its rich heritage and demonstrated commitment to holistic sustainability. Our nation's ancient wisdom and cultural practices are not relics of the past but living resources that offer innovative solutions to contemporary challenges. Sustainability, in its broadest sense, has always been a core tenet of Indian society, enabling us to navigate and prosper amidst centuries of socio-economic complexities. The cultural ethos of India is characterised by mutual co-existence, peace, and interdependence, providing us with a comprehensive approach to addressing modern challenges.

India has been able to leverage this heritage to develop innovative solutions by adapting traditional wisdom to modern needs. We are known to make sustainable choices, which makes India one of the least wasteful economies. Old worn-out clothes in Indian households are first handed down and then often used as a duster rather than being disposed of. Similarly, old newspapers, books and other waste materials have been recycled for generations through scrap vendors. We have a culture of attributing value to all resources and frugality has been a way of life. The concept of a circular economy, therefore, has been embedded in our lifestyle.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE) during the COP26 Summit in Glasgow in 2021 is a testament to India's commitment to global sustainability. LiFE emphasises the importance of adopting an eco-conscious lifestyle and invites the international community to join in a collective effort to move towards mindful and responsible resource utilisation.

The unanimous endorsement of culture as a standalone goal by the G20 under India's leadership holds profound significance for the international community. By this elevation, we can collectively reaffirm the critical importance of culture in fostering inclusive, resilient, and interconnected societies. This paradigm shift in global development thinking is not just timely but essential for the well-being of current and future generations. As we look towards a post-2030 world, embracing culture as a core component of the global development agenda is not just a strategic choice — it is an essential step towards a brighter, more harmonious future for all nations and peoples.

Mohan is secretary and Pandeya is joint secretary, Union Ministry of Culture

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HOW TO FUND POLLS

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Instead of electoral bonds' (IE, February 27). The Supreme Court's recent verdict outlawing electoral bonds has rightly shifted focus on the future of political funding in the world's largest democracy. The money raised by political parties through the EBS was only a fraction of what they and their candidates actually spent during elections. Elections are now reduced to a display of financial power. The more money a party has, the more it can spend on campaigning. An ideal fundraising structure should have total transparency about donations beyond a specific threshold to maintain people's trust and combat corruption. To prevent quid pro quo deals and cronyism, there should be a cap on the amount one could donate to a political party. Parties should incorporate crowdfunding into their campaigns to promote public participation.

Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

WAR'S TRAGEDY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A tragic anniversary' (IE, February 27). Against a relatively weak opponent like Ukraine, many political analysts and military experts had expected Moscow to run over Kyiv. But the war has dragged on, with no end in sight. Besides the immense

toll that it is taking both sides, there have been many unfortunate consequences. The world appears to be more divided than ever before, supply chains have been disrupted and the pandemic-affected global economy is yet to find its feet. Knowing that there cannot be any clear winner in this war, a resolution is needed for the sake of humanity.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

THE STORE WE NEED

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'More in store' (IE, February 27). The government's move to double the storage capacity is better late than never. The continued wastage of foodgrains due to lack of proper storage facilities amid poverty outraged the SC in 2010, when it ordered the free distribution of foodgrains to the poor instead of allowing them to rot in the FCI godowns. In 2020, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution told the Lok Sabha that more than 38,000 metric tonnes (MTs) of foodgrains had been damaged in the last five years. This damage has caused a cumulative loss of over Rs 484 million. Moreover, apart from capacity, the lack of human and other resources in FCI to manage challenges posed by pests, leakage during the rainy season, flooding etc are detrimental to grain safety.

LR Murremu, New Delhi



SUANSHU KHURANA

Loss, longing and a letter

There was an emotional authenticity and accessibility to the songs of Pankaj Udhas

IN THE LATE 1990s, my mother, a classically trained sitar player, reluctantly attended a Pankaj Udhas concert, cajoled by her closest friend. Reluctantly, because she always thought that Udhas's voice was ordinary and lacked the *vazan* (gravitas) and *golaai* (wholeness) that her heavyweight favourites — Mehdi Hassan, Ghulam Ali and, to some extent, Jagjit Singh — had.

She gave in to her friend because there was one potent weapon in Udhas's arsenal. "We'll listen to 'Chitthi aayi hai' and come back," she told the 13-year-old me, as we walked to the open-air concert space. I had heard and watched the song on television many times and didn't mind the outing.

An hour into the concert came the song we were there for. The audience, which had been demanding his songs about *sharaab* and *shabaab*, fell silent, as Udhas began the famed refrain which described the emotions of a father through a letter. And there they were, the lines that turned the atmosphere wistful: "Saath samandar paar gaya tu, humko zinda maar gaya tu/Tere bin jab aayi Diwali, deep nahi dil jale hai khaali" from Mahesh Bhatt's film *Naam* (1986).

The audience wept, including my mother

and her friend — the former, imagining the pain of her parents because she lived far from them, and the latter, as she told us later, for her son, a young Army captain posted in Sichen after the Kargil war. Everyone found their own story reflected in Anand Bakshi's lyrics and Laxmikant-Pyarelal's tune. Listeners welled up hearing it in Udhas's uncomplicated voice, including those who didn't think much of his voice — its timbre, texture or range. Such was the effect that this song by Udhas could have on people.

There were stories back then of the song making such an impression on non-resident Indians that many considered moving back. One didn't often see such power in a *nazm*. It was surprising how 'Chitthi aayi hai' could evoke such an acute sense of loss. The song will remain synonymous with Udhas, who passed away in Mumbai at 72 after a months-long struggle with pancreatic cancer.

Born and raised in Gujarat, Udhas trained in classical music in Mumbai under Navrang Nagpurkar of the Bhendi Bazaar gharana besides lessons in Urdu pronunciation. He had moved to the city with his family after his brother Manhar began singing in Hindi films — Udhas thought it would give him a foothold

in the industry. But despite the success of the Usha Khanna composition 'Tum kabhi saamne aa jao', which he sang for the film *Kaamna* (1972), Udhas couldn't find work. This was a time when films were heavily dependent on playback singers like Mohammed Rafi, Lata Mangeshkar, Manna Dey and Kishore Kumar, for box-office returns. Not many wanted to bet on a newcomer, unless of course, they couldn't afford the big names.

Around that time, Udhas, who had been fascinated by Begum Akhtar's voice, decided to turn to ghazals and brought out his first album *Aadha* in 1980, followed by *Mukarrar* in 1981. This was poetry that eschewed difficult phrases and metaphors in favour of clear, plain language, presented like a *ghazal-almama* film song.

The ghazal, in its traditional form, glorified love and longing, pain and separation, and often the *maikhaana* (tavern). It was considered a sort of cultured opposition to religious orthodoxy, presenting a modern, secular point of view. Much of that context was lost in the music of the 1980s and 1990s, as the form adapted to survive and developed into the soft, nostalgic genre of today. As the vibrancy of Urdu, the language it was pre-

dominantly sung in, declined, the ghazal, too, lost much of its essence.

In the 1980s, even though very few ghazals were brilliant, the genre became a mainstay of film music. Udhas, along with ghazal singers such as Penaz Masani, Chandan Das, Rajender and Nina Mehta, the Hussain brothers, and Bhupinder and Mitali Singh, was part of a wave, with Jagjit Singh at its crest.

Udhas performed ghazals like light music, in a voice that didn't have the refinement and virtuosity of Mehdi Hassan and Ghulam Ali and lacked the soulfulness that Jagjit Singh brought to the genre. Still, he remained popular, especially among those who didn't know Urdu well, for the simplicity of his music, which, at times, felt inventive. He also entered the Indian pop space in the late 1990s and found success with soft-pop ghazals such as 'Aghista' and 'Chandi jaisa rang'.

What worked for Udhas was the accessibility of his songs. This may be why many still find an emotional authenticity in his music. For this, Udhas should be celebrated — and for the moving letter from a father that he once sang about.

suanshu.khurana@expressindia.com



OUR VIEW



Roll back the Big State; relieve the middle class

Prime Minister Modi has expressed disapproval of excessive government interference in middle-class lives. This should serve as a basis for an overhaul of India's state apparatus

Speaking at an event on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "I want to take the government out of the lives of people. Especially, I don't approve of government interference in the lives of the middle-class. What is the need of the government everyday and at every step? We should create such a society where government interference is minimal." For the poor, the Indian state would offer support to fulfil basic needs, but for the rest, he said he would end unnecessary intervention as part of his governance agenda over the next five years. In some ways, this is reminiscent of Rajiv Gandhi's observation of welfare leakages, which squarely focused reformist minds on state inefficiency. Modi's words focus attention on another aspect of our lived reality in India: the Big State. While "Minimum government, maximum governance" is an oft-cited mantra and 'Ease of living' has been a catch-phrase for the administration, his promise will resonate with anyone who has had sarkari encounters.

A list of reforms to roll back the state's presence in Indian lives could go on endlessly. The principal pain-points, though, are in evidence all around. Take taxation. As its rationale is valid, taxes are inescapable. But how it is levied makes a difference. Not only does it remain far too complex in India, it's clear that the middle-class bears an outsized burden. In spite of a 'faceless' regime to curb harassment by officials, taxpayers whose 'high value' transactions are under watch routinely receive notices asking for explanations. And now there also exists a refundable but pointless levy on money sent overseas that varies by purpose and makes one's overall tax liability even harder to understand. Likewise, the compliance protocols for anyone

trying to create a retirement fund can cause chronic exasperation. Frequent know-your-customer (KYC) updates are just one part of it. The Aadhaar system was meant to subsume other requirements, but a fixation with identity verification seems to have led to a proliferation of paperwork needed for asset ownership. Instead of a digital pivot easing lives, files get jammed between old and new systems. The online interfaces run by most sarkari authorities are so poorly designed that unsuspecting users trying to resolve a hitch often get stuck in an infinite loop. The Centre cannot be singled out for all this. In Delhi, for instance, it was the judiciary that had low-emission private cars pushed off the streets by means of an order against old vehicles; and it's a municipal body that penalizes home-owners who have not been able to geo-tag their property, as demanded, with no help available from policy enforcers.

The state must also commit itself to staying out of the private lives of people. Posts on the microblog platform X suffer excessive oversight, with suspension orders issued every now and then, even as New Delhi's push against chat encryption jars with the right to privacy. Technology enables an invasive state, but that's no reason to have one, especially since a colonial law on sedition that survives in a new guise could be misused to stifle dissent, without which democracy can turn dysfunctional. Just as government actions must not abridge free speech (except if lives are clearly at stake), the state has no business prying into private affairs. Should Uttarakhand's uniform civil code serve as a model for Union-level legislation, even live-up relationships will come under strict regulation. This would flout the basic ideal that Prime Minister Modi endorsed.

MY VIEW | ON THE OTHER HAND

Indian households are investing more in stocks than it may seem

They have been putting in impressive sums if we count their swelling indirect investments as well



VIVEK KAUL
is the author of 'Bad Money'.

Individuals in stocks. In August 2022, the government had stated in the Lok Sabha that 85% of the contributions are invested in debt instruments and 15% in exchange traded funds (ETFs), which invest in stocks that make up indices like the BSE Sensex and NSE Nifty.

In August 2023, the government shared data showing that the EPFO had invested a total of ₹1.29 trillion in ETFs from April 2020 to March 2023. The EPFO started investing in stocks only in 2018-19. Other than the EPFO, the National Pension System also invests in stocks indirectly. Third, all the household money coming into MFs isn't necessarily going into equity funds that invest in stocks.

While keeping the third point in mind, the money indirectly being invested in stocks through the first two routes needs to be taken into account as well. Once that's done, it's safe to say that there is more household money going into stocks, albeit indirectly, than before. Of course, to come up with an exact figure, more aggregate level data is needed in the public domain.

Now, the point about Indians investing only a small amount of their savings in stocks is true at a broader level, though the situation is not entirely as Shah made it out to be. So, why don't households invest more in stocks?

First, it's the amount of risk that people are comfortable with. In their minds, many individuals, especially the older lot, still carry the scars of stock market scams in the years gone by. They often equate investing in stocks with gambling. This is changing. But, like any societal change, it will take time. Of course, many investors now seem to be punting big on stock derivatives (options in particular), rather than buying stocks. As a recent *Bloomberg* news report pointed out: "In 2023, Indian investors traded more [options contracts] than anywhere else in the world." Retail investors carried out 35% of these trades, with the average time of holding an option being under 30 minutes.

Second, MFs were allowed to use celebrities for advertisements only in 2017. The impact of this can be seen in the 'Mutual Fund.sahi hai' campaign. Celebrities like Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni mouthing this line improves the top-of-the-mind recall of MFs as an investment avenue.

Third, for many years, the attraction of insurance as a tax-saving investment has been strong, a selling point that insurers have built over the decades. Of course, the saleability of tax-saving MFs has been rather limited. This should now start to change with India's new income tax regime becoming the default option, for which tax deductions under Section 80C have been done away with. So, individuals will now have to invest for the sake of investing well, and not just to save tax, and hopefully, over a period of time, they'll realize that investing indirectly in stocks through MFs is a much better way than through life-insurance policies.

Finally, outstanding investments in MFs in 2019-2020 had stood at 5.9% of India's gross domestic product (GDP), jumping to 8.7% in 2022-23, after touching a high of 9.2% in 2021-22. Some of this jump is because of investors investing more money in equity MFs—except for the pandemic year of 2020-21. Further, from April 2020 to March 2023, investors on the whole withdrew money from open-ended income/debt MFs. Investments in life insurance funds have gone up from 19.3% to 22.2%. Investments in pension funds have gone up from 2.9% of GDP in 2020-21 to 3.3% in 2022-23 (data for 2019-20 isn't available). Of course, along with fresh investments, rising stock prices have also contributed to the jump. Meanwhile, outstanding investments in bank fixed deposits shrank from 48.2% in 2019-20 to 46.6% in 2022-23. So, clearly, households are holding a greater proportion of their savings in stocks than before, albeit indirectly, and a lot of it, though not all, is held through MFs.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

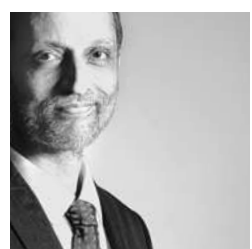
Beware the investment activity that produces applause; the great moves are usually greeted by yawns.

WARREN BUFFETT

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

The consumption survey captures predictable changes

AJIT RANADE



is a Pune-based economist

A fact sheet for the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) 2022-23 has been released by India's statistics ministry. The full report with unit-level data is awaited. It covered roughly 100,000 urban and 150,000 rural households, implying that our urban population is two-fifths of the total. This estimate is based on census classification, but the 2021 comprehensive census is delayed by five years. So we may be under-estimating the urban population. If so, it might give a distorted picture of the urban-rural divide. For instance, if better-off consumption numbers are taken as being in rural areas when they should be counted as urban, it would show the rural economy doing better than it actually is. And the census definition of what constitutes 'urban' may be too conservative anyway. The point, however, is not to be dismayed by relatively slower growth in rural incomes or consumption, but rather to focus on reducing urban squalor and improving urban infrastructure and govern-

ance. Rapid urbanization and a concomitant widening of the rural-urban divide are inevitable consequences of high growth. It is the cities which produce the bulk of jobs and act as a magnet for migrants. But their governance, fiscal capacity and infrastructure fall short of the public resources they need.

The consumption surveys conducted in India are among the largest in the world and known for their rigour and regular frequency. Their data ought to be available every five years or so. But the 2017-18 survey was suppressed by the government on claims of poor quality. Hence, the present one has come after a gap of 11 years. The past decade saw dramatic changes and macroeconomic shocks, including demonetization, the pandemic and war-related disruption. Those shocks could have been disruptive, but consumption spending tends to be less volatile than income and thus more impervious to shocks. If one believes in the life-cycle hypothesis, consumption trends over time smoothen out periodic spells of saving and dis-saving, and the employment status of households.

Some stylized facts for India's consumption have stood the test of time. Most of the expenditure is still on food (although it has finally dipped below 50% of the total). Over

time, the consumption pattern has evolved as follows: from cereals to non-cereals; from carbohydrates to proteins, including milk, eggs, poultry and meat; from home-cooked to packaged food, including restaurants; and from food to non-food. This long-term trend is also manifest in the comparison between the surveys of 2011-12 and 2022-23. For instance, the spending on cereals by rural households dropped from about 11% to 5% over these 11 years. At the macro level, this is due to higher incomes and a greater share going to non-food items such as durables and services. The picture is more complicated when one examines data across households and deciles of consumption spending. One notices differential growth rates, widening (or narrowing) gaps between the rich and poor, and implications for consumption inequality.

In 2012, the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the US published a report, *100 Years of Consumer Spending*. This covered the period between 1900 and 2000, spanning an era

from a time when electricity, running water or flush toilets were scarce to one that had highways, automobiles and the internet. For the average household, spending on food dropped from 50% to 20%, and spending on housing and services went up sharply. Of course, family sizes became smaller, more women entered the work-

force, child labour became non-existent and significant social security was introduced. In the long term, the fraction of household income spent on food and clothing declines, while that spent on housing, transportation and insurance increases. Healthcare has remained mostly constant. Such a trend is likely to be seen in India over the next several decades. As public spending on social security, healthcare and education rises, household spending on these could show a slowdown or decline.

The HCES of 2022-23 has predictable changes over its counterpart from 11 years ago. The share of spending on food is down. The pace of increase in spending is higher

for urban India than rural. This leads to divergence. Regionally speaking, it implies that states with a lower share of urban residents or a lower rate of urbanization will find their per-capita consumption spending growing slower. This could partly explain the north-south divergence. The other trend is an increase in the share of expenditure on rent, conveyance, services and household durable goods. The US data too showed an increase in the spending share of transportation. That was natural for a nation flush with privately-owned automobiles. In India's context, it reflects both private vehicles and a lack of public transportation.

The survey also shows a slowdown in consumption spending across the three surveys from 2004-05 till 2022-23. Some of this is due to a larger base. After all, our economy has grown to three times its size in the past 20 years. Why is consumption spending not rising at the pace of national income? This is a crucial question. The survey data is important not only to assess the well-being of households, and arrive at poverty measures, but also to assign proper weights to items and update the consumption basket used to compute the Consumer Price Index. The latter is the key indicator guiding monetary policy, which has varied further effects.

Spending trends are on expected lines but why expenditure lags national income is a good question



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

The budget paved a path for DPI to propel deep-tech innovation

The Centre's R&D outlay and draft deep-tech startup policy can rely on DPI to catalyse India's emergence as a global leader



ARVIND GUPTA & AAKASH GUGLANI

are, respectively, an adjunct professor of data and digital economy, and head, Digital India Foundation; and policy manager at Digital India Foundation.

The trajectory of digital public infrastructure (DPI) in India has undergone a significant shift, transcending its conventional role as a government service delivery mechanism to act as an important factor of production (just as physical infrastructure is counted as capital) in the economy and an instrument for societal transformation. This evolution, characterized by cost savings, trust in open architecture and a culture of innovation, attracts startups and other private businesses to rely on DPI, with India's ₹1 trillion research-and-innovation corpus for deep technology announced in the interim budget likely to fuel ambitions across the country.

In the early stages of DPI deployment, the basic purpose was to reduce leakages in government welfare delivery. However, it also paved the way for hundreds of fintech firms, new-age stock broking enterprises and digital lenders by reducing the cost of customer acquisition and pushing global tech companies to create products and services built on DPI. The open architecture of DPI has served as a growth propellant for our startup ecosystem.

The advancement of DPI in different domains and state innovation funding are intertwined, each complementing and catalysing the other in India's quest for tech leadership. This symbiotic relationship is fundamental to democratizing people's access to cutting-edge technologies, fostering frugal innovation and empowering startups to join the deep-tech race underway.

This relationship would shape two policy outcomes: first, it will increase India's R&D expenditure, currently at 0.7% of its GDP, and direct significant investment towards deep tech development, an area that needs a lot more private investment and holds immense transformative potential; and second, widen the scope and scale of DPI in critical and emerging tech fields to help deep-tech startups, other enterprises and research institutions compete with global players.

To seize this opportunity, the draft National Deep Tech Startup Policy (NDTSP) 2023 outlines a comprehensive vision. In conjunction with the capital allocation and policy objectives outlined in the draft, India must harness strategic technology partnerships with reliable allies. Also, deploying DPI is essential, as it can provide AI computing resources at population scale, thereby reducing the barriers to entry for startups looking to join the tech ecosystem. By combining these elements, India can create an environment conducive to deep-tech innovation and sustainable growth.

Strategic alliances for deep tech: Partnerships with countries such as the EU, US, Japan, Russia and Australia offer access to quantum technology, high-performance computing, research hubs, startup exchanges, joint research endeavours and



tech transfers. This can provide Indian startups with the resources and capabilities needed to innovate and thrive. India's Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC) is already engaged with its US and EU counterparts to deploy high-performance computing for climate change, bio-hazards, bioinformatics and drug development.

Working groups under these strategic alliances for critical technologies could install a coordination mechanism and report to the Inter-Ministerial Deep Tech Committee, as envisaged in the draft NDTSP. This panel can recommend policy measures for setting up online repositories, providing comprehensive information on global research and innovation grants, developing open science and data-sharing platforms, and creating appropriate frameworks for higher educational institutions to incentivize entrepreneurship.

DPI as a modern factor of production: At the heart of maximizing the potential of our alliances lies the strategic use of DPI to propel India's deep-tech ambitions. This ecosystem has grown remarkably, with over 243 startups having raised more than \$1.5 billion since 2014. Notably, deep tech has emerged as a pivotal sector for private capital allocation, with investments exceeding half a billion dollars across 61 startups in 2023 alone.

Through a focused DPI strategy encompassing domains such as cloud computing, sovereign artificial intelligence (AI), and the Internet of Things (IoT), India can democratize technology access and empower startups to leverage deep-tech solutions.

AI computing power as DPI could serve as an especially valuable factor of production. It would

enable startups, for example, to access and deploy critical technologies at scale. With the aid of super-computing platforms such as Airawat (an acronym of AI Research, Analytics, and Knowledge Assimilation) under C-DAC, startups can streamline their operations, ensure data privacy without having to compromise on affordable computing capabilities, and scale up their businesses rapidly. DPI for AI computing will provide avenues for startups to innovate and deploy deep-tech solutions in sectors such as healthcare, biotechnology, green-tech, climate modelling and urban development.

Moreover, the capital provided by the government's budget, coupled with private sector participation, is set to create a conducive environment for attracting global investors. By demonstrating a commitment to fostering innovation and supporting deep-tech startups, India is positioning itself as an attractive destination for investment. Strategic alliances enhance this appeal by showcasing India's collaborative approach to technological advancement and its willingness to engage with global partners.

In conclusion, India stands at a critical juncture in its journey towards establishing a thriving deep-tech ecosystem. By leveraging strategic alliances with key global players and harnessing DPI, India can access critical technologies, foster innovation and propel its deep tech startups to new heights. The government's commitment to R&D funding, its draft NDTSP, along with private sector participation and global partnerships, are laying the foundation for India to emerge as a global leader in deep technology innovation.

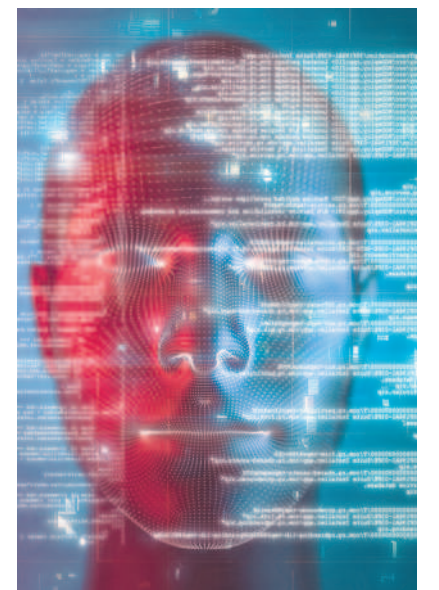
AI predictions of death aren't as scary as this 'ability' sounds

We shouldn't confuse probability-based forecasts with lived reality



F.D. FLAM

is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering science.



AI chatbots mustn't wield greater authority than they deserve

When headlines recently said that artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to create a 'death calculator' that predicts the day you'll die, it sounded like something from a terrifying science fiction story. The reaction showed how readily people believe that AI has magical fortune-telling powers. The reality was not as far-fetched. The paper that spawned the fracas, in *Nature Computational Science*, did involve using AI to predict death, but it wasn't very precise. Using both economic and health data on thousands of people in Denmark, an AI-based system was able to predict with about 78% accuracy which people would die within the next four years.

The algorithms used to create actuarial tables already do this kind of statistical forecasting, but the new system, called life2vec, is more accurate and works in a different way. The lead author on the paper, University of Copenhagen complexity science professor Sune Lehmann, said life2vec predicts life events much the way ChatGPT predicts words.

This matters not because they might create a scarily accurate 'death calculator,' but because of how the forecasts could be used. Such algorithms could be used for ill, to discriminate or deny people healthcare or insurance, or for good, by highlighting factors that affect lifespan and helping us live longer. Or they might improve lifespan calculations, which some people use to plan their retirements.

It was "wild to see how the results were misrepresented," Lehmann said. "People said this AI can predict the second you will die with incredible accuracy." This is because people don't understand the technology. At the same time, hospitals are incorporating AI to do all sorts of jobs. Will doctors and hospital administrators put too much faith in the decisions or forecasts of AI because it's fast and sounds confident? Can the medical system use AI responsibly if people have unrealistic ideas about what it can do? Lehmann said his work in this area is aimed at testing the powers of prediction for all kinds of life events, including job changes, income changes and moving. He's looking for a more coherent scientific understanding of the way algorithms can predict complex phenomena. Often their workings are treated as a mysterious black box. The researchers didn't choose death out of any morbid preoccupation, but because it's something that's precisely measured and recorded.

In groups of young people, the question is too easy. You'll be mostly correct if you

predicted that nobody dies over the next four years. And predicting death within one year isn't too hard—you'd just have to know who was sickest. The further you go, the harder the future is to predict, until you get far enough ahead that almost everyone will have died. At this stage, AI isn't likely to surprise anyone on life expectancy. If you're healthy and not very old, it will predict you'll live more than four years. It can't foresee that you'll get in a freak accident, or predict you'll die in 10, 15 or 20 years, said Andrew Beam, a professor of biomedical informatics at Harvard Medical School. There's a risk that AI could prompt humans to be misled by authority bias: "If you think someone is smarter than you or has access to information that you don't have, there's a real tendency to turn off critical thinking and believe anything that comes out—whether it's a person or an AI," he said. ChatGPT synthesizes information, but it's not very selective and may fold in bad studies and flawed data. "So, if you're in an area where the science is unsettled or the human knowledge is just not there yet," he said. "ChatGPT is going to be just as bad if not worse than you or has access to information that you don't have, there's a real tendency to turn off critical thinking and believe anything that comes out—whether it's a person or an AI," he said. ChatGPT synthesizes information, but it's not very selective and may fold in bad studies and flawed data. "So, if you're in an area where the science is unsettled or the human knowledge is just not there yet," he said. "ChatGPT is going to be just as bad if not worse than you or has access to information that you don't have, there's a real tendency to turn off critical thinking and believe anything that comes out—whether it's a person or an AI," he said.

Sometimes fiction can provide a reality check by reminding us that our actions influence the future. Consider what happened in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The Ghost of Christmas Future gave Ebenezer Scrooge a terrifying preview of loneliness, grief and death. Scrooge then asks a smart, critical question: "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?" If the reporters trying to scare people with life2vec had asked that question, they would have gotten the same answer Scrooge did from the ghost: Of course our actions can change the future. A forecast doesn't seal our fate in stone.

This new system reinforces what other studies have shown—that income and job type can affect the length of your life. Being poor and having a job where others have power over you is correlated with premature death. Dickens recognized it long ago. Maybe AI can turn this observation into real-life scenarios that will motivate today's Scrooges to address the inequalities that shorten so many lives. ©BLOOMBERG

MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

A database of AI failures will foster innovation safety

RAHUL MATTHAN



is a partner at Trilegal and also has a podcast by the name Ex Machina. His Twitter handle is @matthan

Last week saw the release of yet another artificial intelligence (AI) model, Gemini 1.5, Google's much-awaited response to ChatGPT. As has now become the norm, on the day of its release, social media was saturated with gushing paens about the features of this new model and how it represented an improvement over those that had come before. But that initial euphoria died down quickly. Within days, reports started trickling in about the images generated by this new AI model, and how it was compensating so heavily to avoid some of the racial inaccuracies implicit in earlier models that its creations were woke to the point of ludicrousness— with some being downright offensive.

In India, Gemini ran into problems of a somewhat different ilk. When asked to opine on the political ideologies of our elected representatives, its answer provoked the ire of the establishment. In short order, the government announced that the output of this AI model was in violation of Indian law and that attempts at eluding lia-

bility by claiming that the technology was experimental would not fly.

There is little doubt that Gemini, as released, is far from perfect. This has now been acknowledged by the company, which has paused the image generation of people while it works out how to improve accuracy. The concerns of the Indian government have also been addressed, even though the company continues to reiterate that Gemini is just a creativity tool that may not always be reliable when asked for comments on current events, political topics or evolving news. I am not pointing all this out to initiate a discussion on whether or not intermediary liability exemptions ought to extend to AI; that is a debate that still needs to take place, albeit in a broader context. What I want to do is explore a broader point on the approach to regulating innovation.

In most instances, the only way an invention will get better is if it is released into the wild—beyond the confines of the laboratory in which it was created. Much innovation comes from error correction: the tedious process of finding out what goes wrong when real people tinker with an invention and put it through its paces. This is a process guaranteed to result in unintended outcomes that the inventors would not have

imagined even in their wildest dreams. Inventions can only get better when they have been put through this process. If we are to have any hope of developing into a nation of innovators, we should grant our entrepreneurs the liberty to make some mistakes without any fear of consequences.

This is what Mustafa Suleyman calls a culture of failure—the reason why he believes civil aviation is as safe as it is today. This is why it is safer to sit in a plane 10,000 metres above sea level than in a speeding car anywhere in the world. Unlike every other high-risk sector, the airline industry truly knows how to learn from failure. It has put in place mechanisms that not only ensure that the company involved learns and improves, but that those findings are transmitted across the industry so that everyone benefits.

Consider some examples. In 2009, when Air France Flight No. 447 stalled at high altitude, an investigation of the incident led to industry-wide improvements in air-speed

sensor technology and stall recovery protocols. When Asiana Airlines Flight No. 214 crashed in 2013, the resulting inquiry led to improvements in pilot training on the use of autopilot systems and an increase in manual flight practice.

This is why air travel is so safe today—because no accident can be brushed under the carpet until its reasons have been picked apart and analysed and proper remediation initiated. If AI is as dangerous as so many people claim it is, surely we should be looking to put in place a similar culture.

With this in mind, Partnership on AI, an organization co-founded by Suleyman, has established an AI Incident Database. This is an initiative designed to

document and share information on the failures and unintended consequences of AI systems. Its primary purpose is to collate the history of harms and near-harms that have resulted from the deployment of AI systems, so that researchers, developers, and policymakers can use them to better understand

risks and develop superior safeguards.

We need to take the idea of the AI Incident Database and globalize it, so that, through a consensus of like-minded nations, we can not only help companies overcome their AI failures, but also allow the industry as a whole to redesign their systems to account for these consequences. This will call for a shift in approach—from a closed inward focused mindset to one that encourages more open development. It will also call for a more systematic approach to the recording and analysis of mishaps, so that they can not only be reliably summoned, but offered to developers, researchers and policymakers in a non-judgemental environment that will allow us to learn from our mistakes.

What might this look like? During India's recent G20 presidency, I suggested that we create a rapid action task force on AI—so that the 20 most influential countries in the world can quickly exchange early warning signs of impending AI challenges. This, I argued, would give us a head-start in staving off risks that have not yet manifested themselves widely.

And if enough of us cooperate, globally, we will be able to foster a culture of constructive failure.

Experimental technology needs space for failure and our collective learnings can mitigate risks

An agenda for farm sector

BHARAT DOGRA

The key to a satisfactory food and farming system is to bring together and promote at the same time the four most important concerns of protecting livelihoods, environment, biodiversity, and food safety. It is certainly possible to evolve such a holistic policy as the concerns are essentially compatible and hence can be integrated with each other.

Unfortunately government policies in India have fallen far short of such an ideal integration. The broader understanding on the basis of which such an integration can be achieved has been missing. Even more unfortunate, the more prominent farmer movements which have been making headlines recently have not been able to reflect such an integration in the articulation of their demands and have often placed predominant emphasis on their economic demands while neglecting environmental aspects, forgetting that in the absence of environment protection the sustainability of their livelihoods (and even more so of the next generation) will be seriously threatened.

Some opposition leaders displaying a short-term vision have sought to snatch quick election-time gains by committing to immediate endorsement of farmer demands in their entirety without bothering to understand the implications of such a step.

However the debates triggered by the farmers' movement would serve a useful purpose if these lead to more comprehensive examination of the needs of an alternative farming and food system that can integrate the key concerns of protecting livelihoods, environment and biodiversity while also providing safe and healthy food.

It is not enough to criticise the existing system, we should be clear about what we actually need. If there is no clarity, then in the name of 'reforms' we can be pushed from a bad situation to a worse one.

The concept of 'social agro-ecology' is integral to moving towards an alternative food and farming system that will best meet the needs of our country and people, and can even serve as a model for other countries. Social Agro-Ecology can be defined as the meeting point of equality and environ-

ment, justice and safety, of livelihood and health and stands strongly for a farming and food system based on this.

India is blessed with a diversity of agro-climatic and agro-geographical situations calling for a highly decentralized approach to farm development. This reality has always been there and over-centralization in farming should never have taken place. This tendency which increased after the green revolution has been harmful for Indian agriculture and should be given up. A decentralized approach which is able to look at local needs and can fully utilize the traditional wisdom in all respects but particularly in the context of diversity of seeds and water/moisture conservation is needed.

Agricultural development in India has been characterized by a highly uneven trajectory. One aspect of this is regional imbalances. Another aspect is imbalance between main cereals on the one hand and millets, legumes, and oilseeds on the other hand. All these imbalances should be corrected.

India should strive to obtain self-reliance in all staple foods including oilseeds and edible oils. This self-reliance can be and should be achieved as soon as possible.

Imports of food and farm produce which directly harm our farmers should be curbed. Imports of all hazardous foods including all GM foods should be banned. As GM foods and crops are very harmful in many contexts, all GM food and non-food crops should be avoided.

As far as possible the effort should be to try to make all areas largely self-reliant in terms of meeting their staple food needs of cereals, millets, edible oils, legumes, vegetables etc. The concept of food-miles being less (food being consumed nearer to production) should be respected. All regions should try to produce enough of their staple foods plus have some local storage for difficult times. All areas should strive to produce at least some extra food to be donated to fighting hunger in any part of the country and world, wherever people are hungry and need food due to their crop-failure or other factors. Traditional practices like free langar and community kitchens should be honoured and promoted.

Ending hunger and malnutrition



should be a top priority of the country and to achieve this primacy should be given to farming and food production. Adequate resources should be allocated to the farm sector and these should directly reach farmers instead of being given to or serving the interests of intermediaries.

Crop and food processing should get the maximum encouragement at the rural decentralized level, the entire effort being led by rural women. The big contribution of women to farming and food processing should be recognized and respected. There should be curbs on wasteful and harmful processing which destroy the nutritional value of natural food, or introduce harmful substances in the course of processing.

Ecological farming practices should be promoted at all levels. India should be promoted as a centre of safe, healthy and highly nutritious food produced by ecologically protective methods. Farmers and villages which excel in such farming methods and production of high nutrition and safe foods should get generous rewards from the government and the community, in addition to a fair price. Farmers and villages using methods which are closely involved with protection of soil fertility and soil-organisms, conservation of water, protection of biodiversity with special emphasis on protection of pollinators, production of safe and nutritious staple food and essential raw materials (such as cotton and jute)

should be ensured a sustainable and satisfactory livelihood and should be rewarded and honored as well.

Huge monocultures should be avoided and as far as possible mixed farming systems which combine the production of several staple food and other crops with animal husbandry, poultry, fisheries, bee-keeping etc. should be followed. Attempts should be made to protect and revive vast and invaluable traditional diversity of seeds so that farmers can be self-reliant in terms of their most basic need - a diversity of seeds needed for their local conditions.

Farm animals should get even more attention due to their higher contribution and need in ecologically protective, organic/natural farming systems. All relations with farm animals, whether cow or earthworm or bee or frog, should be based on respect for their contribution and on compassion. Cattle have a very important role in the context of promoting agro-ecology and their indigenous breeds should be well-protected.

Great respect should be given to the contribution of farm workers. Government and community policies should facilitate and encourage landless farm workers/ rural workers to get some land for cultivation, expanded kitchen gardens etc. while ensuring good wages and a fair deal to them. A fair deal for sharecroppers should be ensured. Farming should be on the basis of small (and

medium) farmers. Surplus land over the ceiling limit should be distributed among landless rural households. Learning from Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement, constant efforts in favour of equality and justice should be made as a campaign and social movement, thereby creating those social conditions in which the rural landless people can get justice and land.

Diversion of food crops for production of liquor, wine, luxury foods and non-essential raw materials should be discouraged. The top priority use of farmland should always be for ending hunger and malnutrition by ensuring adequate production of healthy staple foods. Reduction of consumption of liquor, tobacco, meat, highly processed and rich luxury foods should be facilitated by official food policy in the interests of protecting health, reducing wastage and ensuring availability of wholesome and nutritious food to all.

In villages, government can directly buy a significant part of the crop by paying immediate or even advance fair price to farmers, and then this part of the crop (cereals, millets, oilseeds, pulses) can be stored within the village for ration shop, anganwadi and mid-day meal cooking centre. When a mid-day meal is cooked for schoolchildren, food can also be cooked for providing at least one nutritious meal daily to any destitute or needy persons in the village. Of course, the government should make other purchases also for city ration shops and nutrition centres, and for food security.

Such a food and farming system will contribute greatly to ensuring sustainable, satisfactory and creative livelihoods in farming while also ensuring the availability of adequate, nutritious and safe food for all. It will also promote socio-economic equality, bio-diversity, protection of the environment and welfare of all forms of life. Efforts should be made for creating as much consensus as possible on a package of policies that can help to integrate concerns of protecting livelihoods, environment and biodiversity with the availability of safe and healthy food for all people.

(The writer is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include India's Quest for Sustainable Farming and Healthy Food, Man over Machine and A Day in 2071.)

NEWS ITEMS

MILLIONAIRE'S DEATH

Mr. Joseph Trueman Mills, late Mayor of Leighton Buzzard, has left over pound 4,000,000. He had estates in Norfolk and Bedfordshire and many interests in the City. Mr. Mills who was born in 1836 was J.P. for Leicestershire, and High Sheriff in 1880, J.P. for Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Norfolk, director of the Great Eastern Railway, and Weymouth and Portland Railway, Union Assurance Society, and New River Company. Mr. Mills inherited pound 120,000 from his father who was a silk manufacturer and an active non-conformist. Aged 88 he died in January in consequence of over exertion while riding 25 miles in a biting wind, in connection with the Hunt. He was an old-fashioned business man, disliking telephones, and typewriters, and he never used a motor car, preferring a pony and trap.

REFORM OF THE POOR LAW

The House of Commons was unusually full when the debate on Poplar Poor Law administration opened today. Mr. Frank Briant moved a resolution condemning the action of the Minister of Health in cancelling the Poplar order and remitting any likely surcharge under it, as calculated to encourage illegality and extravagance. Declaring that the real remedy for the difficulties of necessitous areas is to be found in the reform of London Government and of the Poor Law system, he pressed the Government to introduce reforms at the earliest moment. Mr. J. Wheatley, Minister of Health, replying to the debate denied the allegation that he had surrendered to Poplar. His speech, which the Ministerialists loudly cheered, was largely an attack on his Conservative predecessors for their inaction in the matter.

E.B.R. EARNINGS

A meeting of the Eastern Bengal Railway Local Advisory Committee was held at Kollaghat Street, Calcutta. Colonel H.A. Cameron, Agent Eastern Bengal Railway, presided. In opening the meeting Colonel Cameron remarked that although he had reduced the original budget figure of estimated earnings from Rs. 538 lakhs to Rs. 523 lakhs, the proportionate earnings up to the end of January were only about 7 and half lakhs below the original budget proportion. This being the case it looked as if the actual earnings at the end of the year would be better than the revised budget figure, as traffic was keeping up well. At the same time there were always heavy outstanding at the end of the year, and, therefore, it was not easy to forecast at present what the saving would be.

Verdicts keep coming, so does Trump

EMMA SHORTIS

The verdicts keep coming. A few days ago, the three-month hearing focused on Donald Trump's business dealings in New York came to an end. Trump was ordered to pay back more than US\$350 million, plus interest. He and two of his associates are banned from directing any business in New York for three years. His two sons, Donald Jr and Eric Trump, have also been handed two-year bans, and ordered to pay US\$4 million each.

In his judgement, New York Judge Arthur Engoron gave his own insight into the Trump phenomenon, describing what he saw as a "complete lack of contrition and remorse" that "borders on pathological".

While Engoron was referring specifically to business fraud in New York, the judge's observation might also apply to Trumpism writ large.

Coverage of the case and its stunning end has consistently focused on Trump's celebrity - after all, he built his national profile on the back of his supposed business acumen, trading on his long stint as host of the popular television show The Apprentice.

The results of this civil case certainly seem to poke holes in the image of Trump as a consummate businessman. Combined with the money he owes as the result of his loss of a second civil defamation trial brought by E. Jean Carroll, Trump is now in upwards of half a billion dollars of



debt. It's not clear where this money will come from, or what will happen to Trump's existing New York businesses.

This has led some commentators to argue this most recent case represents a "stunning", "devastating" and "shocking blow" to the image of Trump as a successful real estate mogul better placed than anyone to run the world's largest and most important economy.

It is certainly possible to argue Trump's reputation as the embodiment of rugged American entrepreneurship played an important role in his successful bid for the presidency in 2016. At least some of his support was drawn from the sense that a political outsider and ruthless business-

man would shatter the stale consensus of establishment politics.

But if it were possible to make that argument eight years ago, it is less convincing now.

Trump's celebrity profile was, of course, critical to his campaign. His rise to political prominence, though, came not so much as a result of his reputation as a successful businessman, but on the back of his unabashed peddling of racist conspiracy theories about the first Black president.

Trump's ability to tap into a particularly American form of racial revanchism - his political acumen in marrying conspiracy, racism, and political grievance in an increasingly unequal society - is what brought him to power. It is what sustains him still.

The pathology of Trumpism revolves around his politics, not his personal economics. It at least partly explains why this latest case, plus the 91 separate felony charges in four criminal cases, are unlikely to affect Trump's political support, particularly with his base in the Republican Party.

That base is too far down the road Trump began mapping out when he staked his political reputation on the argument that a Black man could not possibly be qualified for the presidency of the United States. Even a half a billion-dollar hole punched through his business reputation will not change that.

That does not mean, however, that continued support for Trump is inevitable.

In another New York courtroom this week, a judge ruled that Trump's first criminal trial will begin in just over a month. On March 25, for the first time in American history, a former president will face criminal charges in court.

In what will likely become the first of four possibly consecutive criminal trials, Trump will face a potential six-week hearing on his efforts to cover up politically damaging information about his relationships with two women in advance of the 2016 presidential election. Dubbed the "hush money" case, this trial represents more than the sordid dealings of an alleged serial adulterer; it represents, arguably, the beginning of a

pattern of deliberate election interference that began even before Trump took office.

If it goes ahead as planned, a late March trial date will likely mean these hearings will barely be over before the next set begins. The classified documents case, centering on Trump's alleged illegal removal of highly classified documents from the White House, is scheduled to begin in Florida in late May. Scheduling for the other two cases, focused on Trump's role in the January 6 insurrection and election interference in the state of Georgia, remains unclear.

None of this has ever happened before. There is really no telling what it will mean for Trump, his campaign, or American democracy more broadly.

Polling suggests that a criminal conviction may dent Trump's national support. It is certainly possible such a conviction (or convictions), combined with eye-watering levels of debt, and the sheer logistics of conducting a national campaign amid multiple criminal trials, will have an impact.

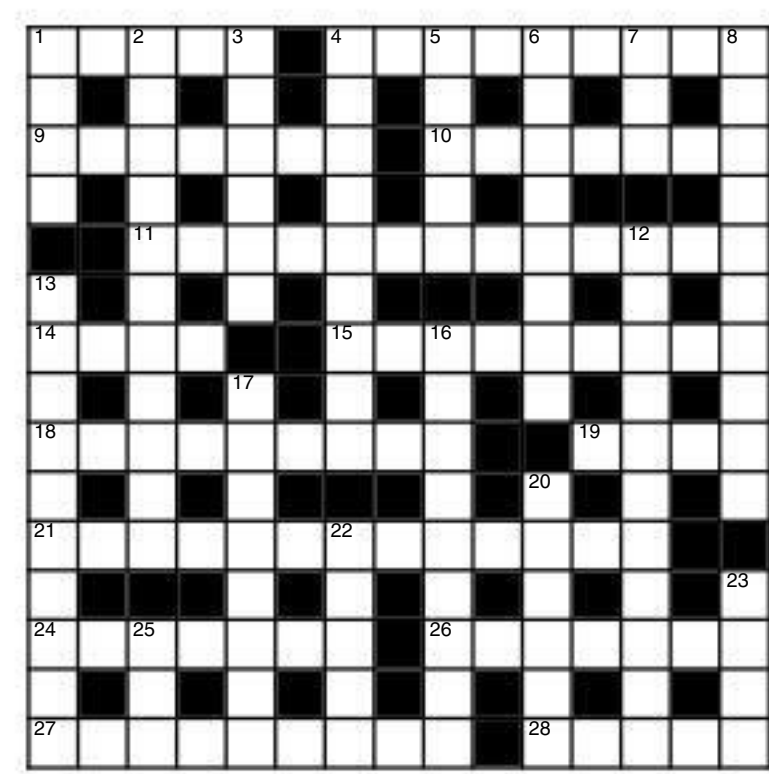
But the pathology of Trumpism has so far proven resistant to what should be crushing blows.

The verdicts will keep coming. Trump may well, too.

(The writer is Adjunct Senior Fellow, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University. This article was published on www.theconversation.com)

CROSSWORD

NO-292703



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

V I S I T E D B E A C H E S
T I R E O P U T
R E G I U S P R O F E S S O R
G N R R Z R K A
I M P R O V E M E N T Y A P
N O S S U P
I N S E T S E A B R E E Z E
A T E E N E X D
C A S S A N D R A S P O O F
R S L N O
E R A P R O V O C A T E U R
E T O S G N R C
P E R I S O N A N G R A T I A
E T N G U E T S
R I P O S I T E S I C R E E C H

ACROSS

- The fundamental ingredient of cobler essentially unaltered (5)
- His men ordered to accept a measure of devotion to Greek culture (9)
- Most important when backing story books (7)
- Musical instrument from Thailand received by Al Gore (7)
- Perhaps Jean Brodie's disciples get the race fixed (13)

DOWN

- Encourage wrongdoing in Lincoln Weather Centre (4)
- A song about king caught hiding gold in tree (9)
- Fair carried on - more or less (4,5)
- Go after earl with a sword (4)
- A production of Lear? (8,5)
- Lies are difficult to understand (7)
- The principal inducement for betrayal (7)
- Foolishly class them as unequalled (9)
- Some moaned aloud over being charged (5)

DOWN

- Go forward right away (4)
- Unreliable spear carrying fellow finally stops working in rep (11)
- Outskirts of Harare under rising river's surge (6)
- Awkward matter of stolen drugs Castro oddly ignored (3,6)
- The smallest amount of arsenic stored by permit (5)
- Access to transport (8)
- Points to work at artificial language (3)
- Psychic youngster speaking without fear (4,6)

DOWN

- Struggling writer not known to importune newspaper boss (4,7)
- Harshly criticise judge along with strange self-important official (10)
- Starts with book covering tax in Italy and Spain (9)
- Willing to search for provider of live sport (4,4)
- Distressing experience in Delaware during exam (6)
- What's owed reportedly brought up by eastern European (5)
- Clergyman getting rid of cocaine immediately (4)
- Operate by decree (3)

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





Decoding spending

The latest household spending survey signals some shifts in people's priorities

In an uncharacteristic late Saturday release, the Statistics Ministry unveiled the broad findings of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey done between August 2022 and July 2023. This is significant as it is the first major survey-based data release since 2011-12 that captures ground realities at the household level — especially with the once-a-decade Census, due since 2021, nowhere in sight. Conducted every five years by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), the results of the last such consumption survey in 2017-18, along with a similar employment survey, were junked with the government citing “quality issues” with the data — viewed as euphemism for the unhappy tidings it may have showed. If the 2017-18 Survey was abandoned because it captured the deleterious after-effects of the demonisation of high-value currency notes in late 2016 on India's largely informal economy, and the subsequent onset of the Goods and Services Tax, the 2022-23 survey also may be interpreted with a dash of salt. For, it may likely magnify the exuberance seen in consumption after two years of pandemic-induced curbs and income losses — what economists call the release of pent-up demand.

To be clear, the Survey suggests some interesting transitions in consumption. Some of the incomplete findings must be published swiftly to enable deeper analysis. Households' average monthly per capita consumer expenditure (MPCCE) rose 33.5% since 2011-12 in cities to reach ₹3,510, and 40.4% in rural India to ₹2,008. The government has sought to paint this as a signal of rising incomes, but it may also indicate a sharp slippage in poverty levels. But this only implies a 3.5% compounded annual growth in rural spends over 11 years, with a 3% growth for urban households — well below the inflation and GDP growth rates in this period. Puzzlingly, even after adding the imputed values of free goods received through a myriad welfare schemes such as the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, the average MPCCE only rose to ₹2,054 for rural households and ₹3,544 for urban peers. That the proportion of monthly spends on food has slipped below 50% in rural homes (to 46.4%), and under 40% in urban homes, with cereals seeing the sharpest drop, is remarkable, and may see inflation trends if used to re-estimate Consumer Price Index weightages. However, it is pertinent to recall that food inflation began spiking last June just ahead of the Survey's completion, and has remained elevated since. So, proportional spends have likely changed. A clearer picture, devoid of pent-up demand and inflation flip-flop effects, is expected through a fresh Survey that concludes this year. So, a recalibration of poverty, inflation or GDP calculations must wait till those results are compiled, and released as well.

Burden of power

Search for superpower status should not drive India's space exploration

Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair, Ajit Krishnan, Angad Pratap and Shubhanshu Shukla — these Air Force pilots constitute the final shortlist of candidates among the elite astronauts for its human spaceflight mission, a.k.a. Gaganyaan, will be selected. The announcement, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during an official visit to Kerala, fills the last real unknown about the ambitious mission, which aims to send an Indian crew to low-earth orbit aboard an Indian rocket. The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has signalled that, setting aside the risk of unexpected delays, it expects to conduct two test flights of the human-rated Launch Vehicle Mark-3 rocket in 2024 and 2025 and the crewed launch in 2025. The Union Cabinet approved Gaganyaan in 2018 at a cost of ₹10,000 crore. Since then, the ISRO centres and their collaborators in industry and academia have worked to bring the mission's various components together while also negotiating delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ISRO's commercial commitments. Now, with the astronauts' names in the open, India is truly in the last mile.

It would be naive to see this as an undertaking of the kind that can be completely free of political capture, but Gaganyaan cannot be altogether politically motivated either. Among other things, the Indian Space Policy 2023 requires ISRO to “carry out applied research and development of new systems so as to maintain India's edge in ... human spaceflight” and to “... develop a long term road-map for sustained human presence in space”. ISRO has also flown a bevy of technological, research, and commercial missions with sufficient support from the Centre to render them immune to political accountability, and Gaganyaan has been no different. But going ahead, it should be different, with justification that is amenable to public scrutiny and debate while seeding a culture of space exploration that is truly democratic, rather than being motivated seemingly by geopolitical aspirations. Similarly, while a road map is being set — accommodating Mr. Modi's “directive” to ISRO to land an Indian on the moon by 2040 — the endeavour must be to give Gaganyaan present and future an identity rooted less in “India's edge”, which when maintained for its own sake becomes a vacuous thing, and more in the fundamental act of creating new scientific and societal value. Other countries, including China, may be technologically ahead, but India must keep the focus on scientific exploration and expanding human horizons, and not on achieving some “space superpower” status.

The global order — a fraying around many edges

Antonio Guterres, the ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), is sounding increasingly pessimistic about the future of the UN. At the opening of the 55th regular session of the Human Rights Council, Mr. Guterres remarked that the “lack of unity” amongst UNSC members had “perhaps fatally undermined its authority”. Reform is essential, but given the divisions, cosmetic changes may not be enough. Is this the end of the road for the current global order?

The world has changed

At stake is the post-World War order whose foundations were built even as the Second World War raged on, reflecting a structure that the Allied powers — eventually the victors of that conflict — felt would prevent another global conflagration. This was anchored in the United Nations Organisation, i.e., the UN itself, along with its specialised agencies, funds and programmes. The main organisation came into being in January 1942 when the 26 Allied nations signed the Declaration of the United Nations and endorsed the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which in turn enshrined the war aims of the United States and the United Kingdom. This is a system of international relations built to manage great power rivalry as it existed three quarters of a century ago. In the years since, power and prosperity have flowed and shifted between and from the original signatories and the international community of states has more than quadrupled.

The UN was created to stop another global war by upholding the sovereign equality of all nations subscribing to the principle of collective security. Sovereign equality, however, faltered at the doors of the Security Council, with its five Permanent Members of super equals, all of whom were Allied powers, and including of course, two major colonial powers and their respective imperial ambitions were not quite buried.

In negotiations that stretched beyond the 1942 Declaration, the Soviet Union was further drawn into the fold with a 1943 American proposal of enforcing peace through “four policemen”, the U.S., the Soviet Union, the U.K. and China, in effect rewarding major war powers with a permanent veto. This might have held the Soviet Union closer to the Allies and ensured China's help with defeating Japan, but the veto effectively set in stone the power structures of early 19th century Europe, even as growing calls for decolonisation and the ravages of a global conflict were reducing the dominance of the imperial powers.

The United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in July 1944 established the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for



Pravinjali Malik is an author and commentator

Reconstruction and Development (or the World Bank) and, in 1947, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which was succeeded by the World Trade Organization in 1995. Together, this financial and trade architecture sought to create a shared international economic order that would not repeat the mistakes of the 1920s and 1930s, plan post-War reconstruction and liberalise global trade.

It is, therefore, ironic that the creation of the IMF embedded a shift in power. By then, imperial Britain was heavily in debt, with the U.S. rising up to take its place at the head of the table. Britain had to relinquish its system of imperial trade preferences, and the sterling gave way to the dollar.

Controlling power structures

Yet, the old world clung on to the power structures of the new institutions, as reflected in the governance of the Bank and the Fund. The World Bank is always headed by an American citizen; ‘Europe’ (Western Europe, in practice) gets to nominate the head of the IMF. The voting rights of member-states of the Fund are virtually frozen in time, despite some limited reform. Currently, the percentage voting rights for, say, the original BRICS members — Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are 2.22, 2.59, 2.63, 6.08 and 0.63. The U.S. alone commands 16.5; add to it the votes of the U.K. (4.03), Germany (5.31) and the rest of the G-7 that tends to vote with the U.S., and that percentage approaches 30. Allocating Special Drawing Rights (a reserve asset for member states) in the most reform requires an 85% majority vote, effectively handing the U.S. a powerful veto. The IMF maintains global stability by promoting financial stability, offering advice, and providing funds to countries in financial difficulty, as long as they accept conditions set by the leadership of the Fund.

Over the years, the UN system which rests on a series of international treaties that are now firmly embedded in international law, smoothened the conduct of international relations, albeit in an image that favoured the original signatories of the UN Charter. Decolonisation, the Cold War, and the breakup of the Soviet Union brought challenges to this dispensation. The matter how the developing world, including former colonies, grouped, they could not overcome the veto at the Security Council or the voting structures of the Bretton Woods institutions. China, of course, found itself perched in the strange position of being a rule maker in one body but a rule taker in the other.

Rising powers responded with alternatives. The Non-Aligned Movement tried a more equal approach and moral force for political and social problems, only to have its shortcomings exposed in the 1962 India-China war. The G-77 attempted

to group together to gain more heft in trade negotiations, but the very disparate needs of an unwieldy group resulted in a laundry list of demands that defied successful negotiation. Smaller, more homogenous groupings fared somewhat better.

Over the years, an alphabet soup of ad hoc groupings representing an a la carte attitude to bilateral and multilateral engagements has proliferated — some with wide-ranging remit, such as the OECD with 38 members, others with a much narrower focus, such as the Quad of the Indo-Pacific. The crisis of one of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was conceived as a challenger to the World Bank, but, effectively, the U.S. veto at the Bank is replaced with Beijing's hold over the AIIB and not everyone is signing up. Despite challenges, the UN-led system is still the default option.

Global events and new fault lines

The 2020s, however, are dealing body blows to the system from within. COVID-19 shut down borders, for people, for goods, for vaccines, thereby undermining the promise of a shared global prosperity based on ever greater cooperation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed the limits of the system. The super equal rule-makers refusing to follow the rules. And, finally, the war in Gaza has exposed the fault lines between the developed and developing worlds; between the guilt over the Holocaust and the recognition of the Nakba; and between the need of the great powers to support the UN and its organizations and the expediency of questioning the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organisation when support for Israel demands it. Most importantly, this conflict tests the commitment of several of the Permanent Members to the bedrock of the UN system — a commitment to human rights and the genocide convention. In West Asia testing that, in practice, the UN is being marginalised by the very players that established it.

What could replace the UN system and how? The organisations and groupings outside the UN are all ad hoc and tend to serve limited interests rather than universal values. Some function as clubs such as the Association of South East Asian Nations, the European Union, G-7, G-20, and the World Economic Forum. Others are limited alliances envisaged as maintaining regional security (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation). Without global treaties and legal obligations binding them, they are essentially ad hoc efforts at their best. Yet, their very existence points to a need for change. The last time the global system changed was in the aftermath of an all-consuming war. That is a sobering thought on which to base an evaluation of the current crumbling global architecture.

The United Nations-led system is still the default option, but events in the 2020s are dealing a body blow

Stop the dithering and encourage green elections in India

Amidst the climate crisis, shifting to sustainable practices across every sphere of human activity has become a dire and urgent. In August 2023, ahead of the Assembly elections in five States, the Election Commission of India (ECI) voiced its concern over the environmental risks associated with the use of non-biodegradable materials in elections (it has been using ‘parties and candidates to avoid the use of material of high impact cost in the election material during an election campaign, since 1999’). Given that the conduct of every election results in an avoidable carbon footprint, there is a need for eco-friendly elections, which would be a boost to environmental stewardship alongside civic participation. Sri Lanka and Estonia, for instance, have conducted environmentally-conscious elections. As India, the world's most populous democracy, gears up for the next general election, environmental considerations must be prioritised, paving the way for ‘green elections’.

Why is there a need for a paradigm shift? The environmental footprint of elections is often overlooked. In the 2016 US presidential elections, the emissions by campaign flights by just one of the candidates alone were equivalent to the carbon footprint of 500 Americans for a year. Traditional methods of conducting elections, with their reliance on paper-based materials, energy-intensive rallies, loudspeakers, PVC flex banners, balloons and disposable items, cause a significant environmental footprint and impact citizens' health. The magnitude of India's elections, with crores of voters, and mass political rallies, amplify this impact. The concept of green elections entails adopting eco-friendly practices at every stage, from campaign materials to election rallies and polling booths.

Research conducted by Willemson and Krips from Estonia (2023) determined that the primary source of carbon emissions during elections is from transportation of voters and logistics to and from the polling booths. The secondary source is from printing the polling booths. Transitioning to digital voting systems could



Amar Patnalk is a Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, from Odisha and an advocate. He was a former Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) bureaucrat

reduce the carbon footprint by up to 40%.

Implementing environmentally-friendly election practices is not just a technical, financial and behavioural challenge. Electronic and digital voting require robust infrastructure (especially in rural areas) and checks for hacking and fraud. Ensuring that all voters have fair access to new technologies and the training of officials are another hurdle. Financial challenges include the cost of replacing traditional materials and technology, which would deter governments that are financially constrained. Cultural inertia in valuing a voter's physical presence at polling booths as sacrosanct is a behavioural challenge. Public scepticism towards new approaches and fear of compromises to vote security are another. Therefore, ensuring transparency and effective auditing of new adaptations are crucial.

Examples in Kerala, Sri Lanka, Estonia

Successful examples of eco-friendly electoral initiatives provide lessons. During the 2019 general election, the Kerala State Election Commission urged political parties to avoid single-use plastic materials while campaigning. Subsequently, the Kerala High Court imposed a ban on flex and non-biodegradable materials in electioneering. Wall graffiti and paper posters emerged as alternatives. Government bodies collaborated with the district administration in Thiruvananthapuram to ensure a green election. Training sessions were conducted in villages for election workers. In 2022, the Goa State Biodiversity Board had eco-friendly election booths for the Assembly elections, using biodegradable materials crafted by local traditional artisans.

In 2019, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party launched the world's first carbon-sensitive environmentally friendly election campaign. It measured carbon emissions from vehicles and electricity used during political campaigns and compensated for the emissions by planting trees in each district through public participation. This offsetting of carbon footprint of the campaign and drew awareness

about the importance of forest cover.

Similarly, Estonia laid the foundations for digital voting by using online voting alternative. This method also encouraged voter participation. The success of Estonia's approach suggests that digital voting accompanied by robust security measures is both eco- and electorate-friendly.

A blueprint

This green transition must involve all stakeholders such as political parties, Election Commissions, governments, voters, the media and civil society. The success of integrating top-level directives with grassroots initiatives to foster a green transition is imperative.

Political parties must take the lead. The journey can begin by enacting legislation mandating eco-friendly electoral practices, with the ECI incorporating them in the Model Code of Conduct. This involves campaigning through digital platforms or door-to-door campaigning (reducing energy-intensive public rallies) and encouraging the use of public transportation for election work. Incentivising the replacement of plastic and paper-based materials with sustainable local alternatives for polling booths, such as natural fabrics, recycled paper and compostable plastics, will waste management and support local artisans.

The ECI can push for digital voting even though this necessitates the training and capacity building of officials. To ensure equitable participation of all voters in the digital electoral process, the government must educate and support voters and ensure equitable access to digital technology. This is essential to enhance the faith of the electorate in the election system and their trust in the government. Civil society should act as a catalyst. Finally, the media's crucial role in emphasising the environmental impact of conventional election methods, turn the spotlight on innovative eco-friendly alternatives.

Embracing eco-conscious electoral practices can help India set an example for other democracies around the world.

The views expressed are personal

Towards emotionally unbiased judgments

Judges are often perceived as beacons of justice; their role demands a profound journey from emotionality to impartiality. In this context, judges must consciously cultivate an attitude of mindful detachment from intense emotions, especially anger, to anchor their decisions in the bedrock of rational analysis and impartial application of the law. Empirical research reveals that anger markedly impairs decision-making. The implications of this finding are particularly profound within the judiciary, where sound judgment is not just paramount but forms the very essence of the profession. Judges, therefore, are tasked with the duty to maintain neutrality and objectivity and to be acutely aware of how anger can warp their reasoning and precipitate erroneous verdicts.

This awareness necessitates preventive measures. Reflecting on a decade of legal practice before the Supreme Court, one of us (Rahman) recalls witnessing numerous fiery exchanges between lawyers and judges which can easily be categorised as angry discourse. Yet, only on one rare occasion was a case adjourned due to a judge's visible anger towards a lawyer's request for adjournment. This incident, albeit isolated, is a testament to the judiciary's cognisance of anger's detrimental effects on sound decision-making. Maintaining emotional equanimity, therefore, is essential for judges to fulfil their responsibility of delivering fair and impartial judgments. Anger does not necessarily mean a violent outburst but even a mere silence and refusal to engage.

A thorough approach
The work of Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman offers insights into our propensity for cognitive shortcuts in decision-making. Shaped by evolutionary 'fight or flight' instincts, we are predisposed to rely on heuristics – mental shortcuts that enable us to swiftly



Talha Abdul Rahman
is an Advocate on Record at the Supreme Court of India



Eklavya Vasudev
is a lawyer and PhD Candidate at the Friedrich Alexander Universität of Nuremberg, Germany

The journey towards emotional wisdom in the courtroom is critical not only for enhancing judicial competence but also for reinforcing public trust in the justice system

navigate and react to our environment. While these patterns are crucial for survival, they pose significant challenges in the arena of judicial decision-making, where the requirement of proof is often beyond reasonable doubt. Since the court has held that evidence is weighed, not counted, it is crucial for judges to be cognisant of situations when the weight is that of ego, anger, or predispositions.

The legal system, in contrast to the instinctual immediacy of the fight-or-flight response, demands a methodical and thorough approach to judgment. Unlike the rapid 'two and two together' calculations typical of our heuristics, judicial reasoning is governed by evidentiary rules and established protocols, which prohibit leaps of logic and unsubstantiated conclusions. In the sphere of criminal law, for instance, circumstantial evidence seldom leads to definitive judgments. Judges are instead charged with the task of weighing several factors, including, most crucially, the element of doubt.

In this intricate tapestry of legal reasoning, the pernicious influence of anger and personal biases is alarmingly evident. Such emotions can contaminate the deliberative process, leading to skewed judgments. Seemingly trivial matters like non-adherence to margins in the filing or even taking a sip of water in the courtroom have invited the wrath of judges. While court manners deserve their appropriate place in the bar and bench relationship, minor infractions are best ignored unless they interfere with the administration of justice.

In the past, if a lawyer was not correctly dressed, the judges would simply look through and refuse to acknowledge them. This underscores a deeper issue: the necessity for judges to exercise emotional restraint, even in the face of perceived disrespect or non-conformity to tradition. Such instances illustrate the thin line between personal sensitivities and judicial decorum, and the need for

judges to navigate this divide with emotional maturity. Being a judge is difficult and daunting, largely because it involves giving up many things that make us human. There is no doubt that lawyers and judges irritate each other but the relationship is intended to brew nothing but fair decision which is as close to being correct as is humanly possible.

There is no doubt that judges face serious challenges in maintaining emotional neutrality. When activated, anger has a lingering effect on mental processes, further complicating and compromising the already complex task of judicial decision-making. Anger often leads to indiscriminate punitive responses, fostering carelessness in thought and a propensity for hasty action. Thus, a judge swayed by anger or bias is at risk of imposing disproportionate penalties or becoming unmindful of crucial legal nuances.

Controlling emotions
Recognising and addressing the impact of affective states like anger is not just an individual responsibility but a cornerstone of maintaining the integrity and fairness of the legal system. Recognising the infiltration of emotions like anger and bias in decision-making processes is the initial, critical step. Once this awareness is established, various strategies can be employed to mitigate their influence.

One effective method is the cultivation of mindfulness. Rooted in the principles of meditation, mindfulness involves a heightened awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and environment. For judges, this can allow for the recognition of emotional states without being overpowered by them. Where necessary, a coffee break must follow to improve decision-making. The journey towards emotional wisdom in the courtroom is critical not only for enhancing judicial competence but also for reinforcing public trust in the justice system.



A thought for today

You can't choose your sons, but you can choose your sons-in-law

Japanese proverb

Rothschild Template

Why we remain fascinated by dynastic wealth and whether this will change any time soon

Their life is our soap opera. It is our interest in the super-rich that shows like *Billions* and *Succession* cash in on. But what family dysfunctions in these shows often miss is the extent to which the greatest wealth creation often comes from families cohering towards this end generation after generation. With the death of financier Jacob Rothschild, we are reminded that his family began building its various fortunes back when Napoleon was yet to be defeated at Waterloo. Bloomberg's 2023 list of the world's top 10 wealthiest families traces one back to 8 generations, one to 6, one to 5, and the rest to 3 generations each.

Born to oil | West Asia's Al Nahyans, Al Thanis and Al Sauds are a class apart. Their billions rose from oil and gas reserves on top of which they were literally ruling. While US's Kochs are called the "Kochtopus" by critics of their formidable financial interventions in politics, it's of a different species, namely the family acquired wealth in a market democracy.



Rags to riches | Other dynasties in the wealth list have even more self-made origin stories. Dhirubhai Ambani started out as a petrol pump attendant. France's Hermes family founded this luxury fashion house making horse saddles. America's Walton empire opened with one Walmart store in 1962, which went

on to transform how people everywhere shop and how much they pay for their shopping. Canada's Thompson family built its information behemoth from one radio station in the 1930s.

Gen to gen | As important as surviving events like World Wars has been how to manage the passing of control from one generation to another. Notable here is how Mukesh and Anil Ambani finally made peace. In a different paradigm, Bernard Arnault, the world's richest man, is putting his five children through a "Darwinian contest" to run LVMH after him.

Tech break | But techbros whose breed is predicted to birth the first trillionaire are different. Gates and Bezos say they will give most of their money to charity. Musk is not a fan of leaving his children in charge either, despite having more than 10 of these. For now though, the family model looks unassailable. That's why the *Pride and Prejudice* opening line about every single man in possession of a good fortune being on the lookout for a suitable spouse still doesn't feel dated. Except, the same goes for every single woman with a fortune.

Fair, Lovely Market

Fairness creams are now less popular. Reason: shifts in beauty norms. Lesson: lecturing doesn't influence users

Fairness creams are no longer as popular as they used to be, says a surprising piece of consumer data from NielsenIQ, reported by Economic Times. Younger audiences are seeking glow rather than fairness, say companies, and fairness creams have grown significantly slower than 'clean' skincare and sun protection. Is this wholesome trend a sign of social change? Some time back, in part responding to global chatter, Indian companies figured out that they couldn't openly hawk their wares for whiter skin. Skincare products across the market changed their pitch.

We've come a considerable way from earlier days. But here's what to remember - what worked? All the scorn heaped on these products and all the pleas to intervene, to ban them didn't work. Matrimonial ads - wheatish, if not fair skin - didn't change. Women



daubed turmeric or sandalwood or talcum powder to achieve various tints. With fairness products, supply simply met demand.

What worked is that beauty norms shifted, as they do, even if slowly. These norms are not eternal truths but social constructs. We once admired the blue-black forms of Krishna or Draupadi, we still have poetic names for all the beautiful hues of Indian skin. The modern fetish for light in India was fed by caste, colonialism and global media. Today, the pushback by popular discourse and media has had a visible impact. Even aspirational fashion magazines show gorgeous models of every race, stock images have diversified, TV shows, actors and models reject old norms and are applauded for it. So, we have more expressions of beauty to choose from, and we're moving with the times. There is little point lecturing or hectoring anyone into seeking a different appearance ideal. The heart and the market have their reasons, and they change when they do.

The lion kink

A zoo story about a name-game that's got the media all abuzz with full might and mane

Jug Suraiya



In a zoo, two felines, Leo Panthera, are puzzled by the hullabaloo about the names given to them.

Leo 1: I'll never understand that strange species called humans.

Leo 2: Me neither. You'd think with all that's happening in that place they call Gaza, and that other place they call Ukraine, they'd have other things to get their knickers in a twist about than what names they call us.

Leo 1: And it's not that I chose the name of a goddess of a particular faith.

Leo 2: And it's not as if I chose the name of a big toot who belonged to another faith.

Leo 1: It's all this faith business that gets humans worked up. What did they think would happen because of the names they'd given us? Love jihad?

Leo 2: Worse. Love zoohad. That's why some people wanted us to be put in different zoos, so that there'd be no inter-faith hanky-panky.

Leo 1: Fortunately, a judge has sensibly ruled that our names be changed so as not to hurt anyone's sentiments.

Leo 2: That's all very well. But what about our sentiments being hurt?

Leo 1: Do we have sentiments?

Leo 2: Course we do! Haven't you heard that song full of sentiment called Lion Eyes, sung by some birds? The Egrets? The Owlets?

Leo 1: You're right. We do have sentiments and they do get hurt. Every second roadside dhaba with signs 'Brakekfass, Launch, Diner - Tandoori, Conti, Chinees' is called Sher-E-Punjab. D'you like having a greasy spoon eatery that advertises 'Child Bear Sold Here' being named after you?

Leo 2: Certainly not. Everyone talks about Gay Pride. How about our pride? We've pride too. Which is why we're collectively called a pride, right?

Leo 1: Right. And thanks to our pride we won't take all this name-calling lion down.

secondopinion

secondopinion

In Final Frontier, 4 Is The First Number

Gaganyaan is only the first step in India's space ambitions. The four selected test pilots will pave the way for future generations to go to the Moon and beyond

Aditya Ramanathan



For the first time in 40 years, a small group of Indians is set to venture into the perilous and untamed wilderness that lies beyond our atmosphere. Yesterday, Modi feted four test pilots - Prasanth Nair, Ajit Krishnan, Angad Pratap and Shubhanshu Shukla - who are to become the first Indians in outer space since Rakesh Sharma's historic journey on Soyuz T-11 in 1994.

Unveiling the fab four | Yesterday's event was a ceremonial milestone for the ambitious Gaganyaan programme, which aims to make India one of only four countries that can independently carry out human spaceflight.

Gaganyaan's genesis can be traced to Modi's Independence Day speech in 2018, in which he set a deadline of 2022 - 75th year of Indian Independence - to 'unfurl the Tricolour in space'. The plan was simple: to put Indians into orbit around Earth for about three days and bring them back safely. However, pulling this off would require a range of complex new capabilities, from a human-rated launch vehicle to an orbital capsule.

Challenges galore | Gaganyaan would also require advanced training for India's new spacefarers. In 2019, an initial roster of 12 handpicked IAF test pilots was ruthlessly pared down to four candidates. The following year, the four pilots headed to Russia for advanced training. However, as fate would have it, Covid broke out, delaying not just training in Russia but also development and validation of key systems in India.

While the deadline of 2022 was now out of reach, the four pilots eventually completed their training. Isro also continued to make steady progress. In Jan, the space agency's chairman S Somanath declared 2024 would be the 'year of Gaganyaan readiness'. This was both a promise of accelerated development and acknowledgement of the difficulties in pursuing the complex and risky endeavour.

Galactic ambitions | As audacious as Gaganyaan may be, it is only the first stepping stone in India's plans for human spaceflight. The next steps are to place an Indian space station in orbit by 2035 and put an Indian on the Moon by 2040. Together, these plans are evidence of a gradual shift in Isro's priorities from practical and

thrifty missions to high-profile programmes inextricably linked to national prestige.

As with human spaceflight programmes in other countries, this shift may attract some fair-minded criticism. Opponents of human spaceflight point out that uncrewed missions backed by modern processors, robotics and communications can perform most of the same scientific tasks as a crewed mission, but at a fraction of the price. Defenders of human spaceflight

High-tech push | Finally, and most significantly, human spaceflight programmes have historically functioned as a targeted fiscal stimulus for high-technology industries, helping countries make technological advances and attract talent. For instance, the Apollo programme not only boosted the nascent microprocessor industry in US but also gave birth to everyday items like Velcro fasteners. Indeed, India's human spaceflight dreams are an implicit bet on the ability of the country's private sector to both support such programmes and to take over Isro's more routine space activities like making remote-sensing satellites.

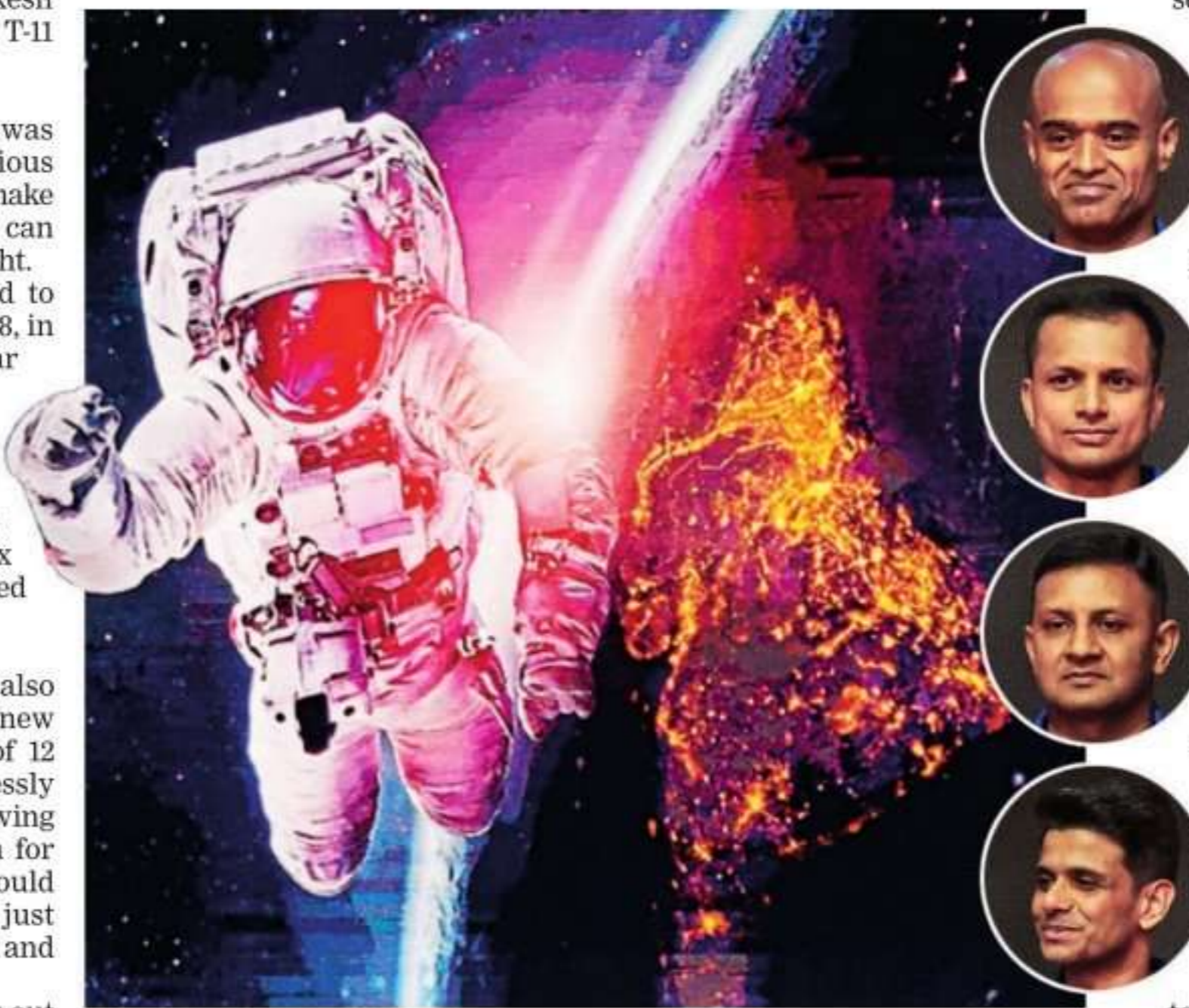
A new space rush | Gaganyaan programme is emerging at a propitious time in the history of space exploration. For over a decade, a handful of private actors in US have begun to overturn the human spaceflight business. SpaceX's Dragon spacecraft currently enjoys near-monopoly in transporting crews to and from International Space Station. Boeing's much-delayed Starliner seeks to break into this market, with a crewed test flight scheduled in April. Both Dragon and Starliner are equivalent of Isro's Gaganyaan capsule, still under development.

Besides this, at least three projects for commercial space stations are currently underway and both SpaceX and Blue Origin are designing spacecraft that can take people to the Moon.

Big business, big dreams | Where does India fit into this picture? One of Isro's goals with Gaganyaan will be to seek commercial opportunities, so that the programme eventually begins to pay for itself. While it can expect stiff competition from American companies, Isro can also become a player in the expanding market for human spaceflight, providing reliable transport to commercial space stations and offering seats to space tourists.

The human spaceflight market also provides opportunities back on Earth. Isro's Human Space Flight Centre and IAF's Institute of Aerospace Medicine can serve as embryos for an astronaut training hub in India that heavily involves the private sector. The four test pilots honoured yesterday are pioneers, but they must be followed by many others who carry the Tricolour into orbit and beyond.

The writer is a researcher at Takshashila Institution



Kamal/Kamal Conundrum: Explained

MP Congress may be in a shambles if Nath quits. If he joins BJP, it will be dealing with feuding ex-Congress factions inside the party

Prasenjit.Mund@timesgroup.com



In the end, no one came and no one went. The Kamal Nath episode was one of Madhya Pradesh's most dramatic political events, that, well, wasn't. The hardened Congress stalwart - nine-time MP, former Union minister, CM - and sole rock standing up to saffron waves in the state, seemed about to roll with the tide to BJP, carrying along son Nakul and the few pebbles Congress is reduced to in the state.

Only, he didn't leave. But one can never tell in this theatre of the absurd. Nath senior for one dealt with the matter in cryptic one-liners, querying reporters, "Why are you so excited?" Only certainty is that ahead of Lok Sabha elections - MP has 29 seats - the stage is set for lots more drama.

State Congress remains a bundle of frayed nerves. 'How can he? He is Indira Gandhi's third son' goes the refrain. Almost exactly four years ago, they had said of Jyotiraditya Scindia, 'How can he, Rahul Gandhi's close dost?' To retain Scindia, there were no heartstrings to yank. With Nath, just enough tug seemed to be left, for now. Or was the pull from BJP weak?

Nath's switch to BJP would impact Congress far more than Scindia's rebellion. Nath's saffronisation couldn't have been explained away as one of sulking impetuosity. It would instead have been a 'senapati' deserting his vanquished troops.

But how did things come to such a pass? Was it Nath reacting to being replaced by a younger Jitu Patwari after Congress lost the December assembly poll? Was it to protect Nakul's political career?

On Feb 6, incumbent Nakul Nath

unilaterally declared himself candidate for Chhindwara Lok Sabha seat, family home turf. Nath senior quickly endorsed it: "Soon as AICC announces candidates' names, Nakul would be fielded." It wasn't the same as saying Nakul would be Congress candidate.

Between Feb 8 and 18, what played out was edge-of-seat viewing. State Congress legal head joined BJP. Chatter that Nath could enter Rajya Sabha buzzed for days before state Congress treasurer, close to both Digvijaya Singh and Nath, was nominated. Five days on, dozens of Congress workers in Chhindwara joined the saffron camp.

On Feb 16, MP's BJP chief announced party's doors were open for father and son, and any Congress member 'hurt' by their party's boycott of the Ayodhya spectacle. Nakul removed Congress's logo from his social media. When on Feb 18, the Nath duo landed in Delhi, it was a now or never moment. Coincidence? One too many?

His camp kept up the refrain of 'maan-samman' being hurt. Nath senior could have scotched the rumours. Instead, he let them run wild. But it all came to naught. It became abundantly clear no warm welcome was forthcoming from BJP despite the doors-open invite. Kailash Vijayvargiya bluntly said BJP didn't need Nath.

When CM Mohan Yadav visited Chhindwara on Feb 21, Nakul was warm and welcoming. Soon after, hundreds of Congress

workers joined BJP. No surprise that sections of Congress are back in brace position.

BJP, it is believed, sees Chhindwara as one of the seats in the way of Modi's Mission 370. Nakul barely has his father's influence - in 2019 Lok Sabha polls, his win margin was 37,000 votes - less than a third of Kamal Nath's 2014 victory margin.

Union home minister Amit Shah has vowed to win Madhya Pradesh 29-0. The day after BJP swept 2023's assembly elections, Nath showed up at Shivraj Singh Chouhan's doorstep, son in tow. Irony is that soon after Congress's victory in 2018 assembly election, Scindia had turned his car towards Chouhan's residence one evening. A year on, he drove into BJP's camp.

For BJP, Nath may not be a big catch, but a highly prized one - the last of Indira-era Congress leaders. The party may however find it hard to explain Nath to its Sikh voters, given 1984 riots' shadow still haunts him. Can BJP afford to antagonise one of its biggest support bases, especially when farmers are on the warpath again?

Nath may also be a high-maintenance acquisition. Not for the veteran the lure of even Raj Bhavan. As it is, BJP is juggling with ambitions of its ever-growing number of heavyweights in Madhya Pradesh, especially the new imports from Congress.

Then, there is Nath's equation with Scindia. The Gwalior scion was left smarting when 'experience won over enthusiasm' in 2018 in Rahul Gandhi's reckoning, and the CM chair went to Nath. Squeezed into a corner over a Rajya Sabha seat, Scindia cried 'enough'. "Listen Kamal Nath and Digvijaya, Tiger zinda hai," Scindia roared after his aides got the lion's share of portfolios in Shivraj-led BJP cabinet in July 2020. Nath had then mocked him as a 'paper tiger', a 'circus tiger'. If experience and enthusiasm are back in the same camp, BJP may find tigers can turn very territorial.

Has the storm blown over? By all accounts, no, for Rahul Gandhi's yatra is expected in MP on March 2. The Kamal Nath episode is far from over.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacredspace

A friend is someone who knows your song and sings it to you when you have forgotten it. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made... They remember... your innocence when you feel guilty; your purpose when you are confused.

Alan Cohen

Get Ready To Dance With Both Arms Free

Marguerite Theophil

Sacred teachers of spiritual and cultural traditions the world over often offer Teaching Stories, rather than moralistic preaching. Teaching Stories invite us to step across a threshold, as it were, to more wholesome ways of seeing and being in the world. Often, they also remind us of our higher goals and purpose that we can so easily lose sight of.

Once there was a weaver who had been creating a beautiful tapestry on her loom, with silken threads of many colours, which came together in a pattern both simple and splendid.

One day, a friend she had not met in a long time came to visit her. Seeing her the weaver exclaimed: "Dear sister-friend! I am so happy to see you. Do come in, you must be tired from the long

journey, let me first fetch you something cool to drink."

As the weaver went into the kitchen, her friend looked around and noticed the gorgeous tapestry and the silk threads shimmering in the wicker basket beside it. She knew they could not be found in the village; the weaver must have travelled far to another town for them. They were so beautiful that she could not resist the sudden impulse and reaching over she snatched one of the bundles, tucking it under her arm.

When the weaver returned and set down the glasses, she noticed the bundles of thread in the basket had been disturbed and that one was missing. She realised with a heavy heart that her friend had taken it.

She thought for a moment; she did not want to confront the woman and shame her, nor did she want to remain quiet about what she had noticed and had saddened her.

As they finished their drinks and chatted for a while, she stood up. "Sister-friend", she said, "this is a wonderful day, we should celebrate our coming together. Do get up and let's dance together!" Hesitantly her friend agreed, "Yes, let us dance."

They stood up and the weaver raised both her arms high and began to sing a song of friendship and sisterhood. She smiled as she began to spin and turn in slow circular motions that grew faster and more joyfully abandoned. She closed her eyes, turned away from her guest as she sang her song, giving her the space to return

the bundle of thread. Her friend began to dance too, but stiffly, uncomfortably, with both her arms pressed close to her sides, holding the bundle of thread tightly underneath one of her arms.

When the weaver noticed this, she said, "Come, come, sister-friend, this is no way to celebrate. Are you sad? Are you worried? Look, dance like me with both your arms raised!"

The friend then raised one of her arms but kept the other pressed tightly against her side. Seeing this the weaver said, "It is such a joyful day, close your eyes, open your arms wide, dance freely and joyfully. Look at me. Like this!" The weaver continued to dance, arms flung wide, spinning, turning, and swaying with joy. The friend looked down and quietly said, "I am sorry, this is all that I know of dancing."

Always be ready to dance with both arms free.



THE SPEAKING TREE